

Monstrosity in post-1990
French women's writing:
A case study of four authors

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Abstract

The final decade of the twentieth century in France saw the emergence of a “new generation” of women writers who offered imaginative renegotiations of corporeal representation. Amongst these newly-created textual bodies, monstrous characters came to populate female-authored stories and presented multiple challenges, disturbing readers and social conventions of physical propriety. In this study, the challenge lies particularly in demonstrating how selected authors have envisaged monstrosity as a means of interrogating changing models of corporeal identity, especially when the subject is undergoing typical physical/psychological transformations of the human lifecycle.

Literary and cultural critics have tended to regard the monster either as an insight into people’s perceptions of their time and social context, or as projections of fears and desires of the human psyche. Whilst most of these readings fail to consider both the social and individual domains where the monstrous intersects, I posit that monstrosity is most productively approached as an evocation of rejection of corporeal and behavioural difference, as it becomes visible to others and to the subject him/herself. I therefore combine a psychoanalytical approach (Julia Kristeva) and theories of power structures within social institutions (Michel Foucault) to decipher the resulting complex response of social and self-rejection of the monstrous subject.

Focusing on four post-1990 French women writers – Régine Detambel, Louise L. Lambrichs, Lorette Nobécourt, and Amélie Nothomb – I explore how these authors have represented monstrosity in terms of limits and demands which are socially imposed on subjects and which are registered upon and circumscribe the body. These authors’ dual social and individual approach to the monstrous allows me to re-evaluate multiple contemporary anxieties around physical difference and bodily changes and gives monstrosity a new voice. I unveil how the texts analysed here creatively offer new spaces to re-think bodily difference and open up other possibilities for human subjectivity.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Encountering new monstrous bodies in post-1990 French women's writing

The origins of this project can be traced back to my interest in recent literature by French women writers with special regard to reading their creative and diverse representations of the body. What particularly sparked intellectual curiosity and then led to the present investigation into a selection of women writers' texts was my discovery of new representations of the body in their fictions published post-1990. In the final decade of the twentieth century in France, a number of stories authored by women came to be populated with new characters who embodied different approaches to corporeal representation; these fictive individuals were challenging to the reader, often perturbing social conventions of visible propriety. A vision of some of these new subjects is aptly captured by literary and cultural critic Lidia Curti's own description of the monstrous bodies that she saw proliferating in contemporary British and American women's narratives. She writes:

Strange unfamiliar shapes, freakish bodies, disquieting forms and hybrid creatures have been creeping into women's narratives, putting in question the frontier between foulness and loveliness, the human and the animal, me and you, female and male.¹

My research project is born of my encounter with such monstrous shapes in French women's fiction published since 1990 and during the first two decades of the new millennium. The denomination of these unsettling and unstable bodies as "monstrous" in turn raises questions as to the attribution of monstrosity: "monstrous" may indicate a label (a stigma that evokes difference and otherness), and it also functions as an approach. In this study, monstrosity is to be understood as a gateway to the human subject; I explore it as a prism which projects onto the text multiple facets of human bodies and identities, forever changing and open to (re)interpretation. I will show that the mobility that lies at the heart of the concept of monstrosity opens the door to an incredibly rich and powerful literary re-envisioning of the changeability and necessary reassessments of corporeal identity. In this study, authors have recourse to monstrosity to evoke changing models of corporeal identity in today's society – that is, the subject's

¹ Lidia Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 107.

own relationship with his/her own body, how the subject's body and gestures are received by others and how they influence the subject's place and role in society. These changing models of identity are explored in the next four chapters through an analysis of selected literary representations of the physical and psychological transformations that characters undergo during diverse episodes of the human lifecycle. From the destabilising metamorphoses of adolescence, to the distasteful images of the sick body, via the unsuccessful result of reproduction and finally to the deteriorations caused to the individual by old age, monstrosity emerges when the subject, unwilling or unable to conform to the corporeal norms expected within a given context, is faced with the complex response of social rejection combined with self-rejection.

Monstrosity can be understood as a medium for people and societies to voice individual or collective anxieties. Cultural theorists and literary critics have seen in monstrosity a gateway that could enlighten our knowledge of people's perception of their time and social context, how they saw themselves (in relation to others), and how they interacted with each other.² This approach to monstrosity lies at the centre of my study of literary representations of monstrosity in contemporary French women's writing. The reading of monsters is a method employed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen to delve into the functioning of the society which creates and then rejects the monstrous individual. The title of his volume *Monster Theory* indicates Cohen's approach, which he restates in the first thesis of his seven-part definition of 'monster culture' as he argues that 'the monster exists only to be read'.³ The necessity to read, that is inevitably to interpret, the monster, is intimately linked with the issues of perception, translation, and eventually with shaping into a text, issues which underpin my study. From "cultural" monsters imagined in human societies to their manifestations in literary texts, I then turn to Curti who posits literature in *Female Stories, Female Bodies* as a platform for reconciliation and/or with new embodiments. She writes that 'Fiction translates the overcoming of dichotomies – theory and politics, art and life, surface and depth, substance and appearance – into hybrid shapes and languages'. The literary response to the opposing

² A notable feature in "Monster studies" has been the recent resurgence of history (especially the medieval and early modern periods) and historical societies as backdrops for the exploration of the monster figure. See for instance: *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 4).

notions within a subject's psyche or given body (which can be, but is not restricted to, a physical human body)⁴ lies in the creation of textual 'hybrid shapes'. Curti continues,

[fiction's] characters (sometimes monsters, sometimes shadows, sometimes ghosts) inhabit borders, intermediate spaces, and move in an indistinct zone at the intersection between the human and the animal, the natural and the supernatural, the beautiful and the horrid, the self and many other selves.⁵

Curti's depiction of a recent invasion of monstrous shapes into women's narratives is polymorphous, and their interpretations are equally multiple. It is my purpose to analyse in this thesis the monstrous characters which have 'crept' into contemporary French women's fictions, to decipher the languages that these authors employ in their texts, to explore manifestations of hybridity and the reception within their contexts, and to unveil whether and how they may offer instances of 'overcoming of dichotomies'. In the four chapters which follow this Introduction, I focus on selected works published by four authors of the "new generation" of women writers that emerged in France in the 1990s.⁶ They are Régine Detambel, Louise L. Lambrichs, Lorette Nobécourt and Amélie Nothomb, authors chosen because their individual takes on monstrosity and the body offer creative reworkings of the relation between the body and the monstrous. Moreover, the collective interrogation around these monstrous depictions that emanates from the following four chapters of this thesis provides a unique and original insight into the contemporary literary investigation of new models of identity. They will reveal the authors' portrayals of monstrous characters to evoke subjects' inability to (always) confine to the physical and behavioural norms of our contemporary society, and the desire to explore human subjectivity via new configurations of the body in writing.

1.2 Post-1990 France: the social, political and ideological context and main trends in women's writing

⁴ The translation of dichotomies could also be identified in the form of the text itself and the actual writing of the story; but these, however, do not form part of my concern in this thesis. On the links between women's writing, autobiography, (pro)creation and the monstrous, see for instance, Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 144-54.

⁵ Curti, p. 29.

⁶ Gill Rye and Michael Worton, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 1-26 (p. 1).

The diverse expressions of monstrosity that emerge in the literary texts explored in this thesis can be understood as ways for their authors to express difficulties and anxieties – both individual and societal – surrounding changing models of identity and self-other relations. These texts appear as creative reactions to and re-imaginings of what it means to be a human subject, specifically, as is the case in this study, a human subject who is undergoing multiple bodily and behavioural changes (of the lifecycle), whilst being a subject in French society during and after the 1990s. The following overview of the social, political and ideological landscape in post-1990 France aims to present the context for the process of writing of my four chosen authors, and also the main themes that emerged in the texts by female authors of the period.⁷

In *Fin de millénaire French Fiction*, Ruth Cruickshank identifies multiple crises that emerged alongside other (often catastrophic) events in the ‘long twentieth century’⁸ in France, shaping the crises at the end of the millennium. Cruickshank argues that at the outset of the year 2000, ‘France was experiencing an intersection of social, political, and economic crises’.⁹ Gill Rye and Carrie Tarr explain that following the near-absence of feminist activism in the public sphere in the 1980s and the early 1990s, gender politics would evolve in the 1990s in France, as women were in the process of ‘making themselves more visible as citizens’.¹⁰ Rye and Tarr also stress the vigour of feminist activism in the cultural landscape, highlighting how some associations confront burning issues in French society such as sexism and the place/visibility of ethnic minorities. The authors note how these ‘associations challenge the ways in which the bodies of those Other to the dominant white male population continue to be stereotyped, demonized, marginalized or rendered invisible within the dominant culture’.¹¹

⁷ It should be noted that each of my next four chapters is dedicated to the exploration of the work of one author and comprises a relevant detailed literature review. Therefore, this section presents the (other) main trends that have emerged since 1990 in the literature by women, and the key issues identified by critics. Any other resource relevant to my study but outside these criteria or not mentioned in this general survey of the field of women’s writing will appear in the literature reviews of individual chapters.

⁸ Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin de millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁹ Cruickshank, p. 2.

¹⁰ Gill Rye and Carrie Tarr, ‘Introduction’, in *Focalizing the Body in Contemporary Women’s Writing and Filmmaking in France*, ed. by Gill Rye and Carrie Tarr (= *Nottingham French Studies*, 45 (2006)), 1-7 (pp. 1-2).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Issues relating to the place, visibility and interaction with the Other in French society are contained within the new representations of the body that emerged in women's texts during the 1990s; in my thesis, these issues and bodies are captured and explored via a focus on monstrosity. In their benchmark study of 1990s French women's writing, Rye and Michael Worton focus, as the subtitle of their volume indicates, on the exploration of new writers and new literatures at the turn of the century. In the Introduction, they write: 'Female authors who came to prominence in the 1990s are the first to benefit from a visibly rich female literary heritage'.¹² The 1970s witnessed an explosion of texts by female authors in France; Margaret Attack explains that this is a consequence of the women's movement, described as 'one of the major legacies of May 68, if not *the* major legacy'.¹³ This high level of productivity sustained by women writers since the 1970s has attracted a considerable amount of critical interest, in and also (mostly) outside of France.¹⁴ As Rye explains in another article entitled 'New Women's Writing in France', women authors began to articulate a certain liberation of their bodies through the creative act of voicing their bodies. She writes that 'Cixous and Annie Leclerc exhorted women in the 1970s to celebrate their bodies and, especially, to explore and to express their sexuality as subjects of desire rather than as objects of male fantasy and fear'.¹⁵

¹² Rye and Worton, 'Introduction', p. 5.

¹³ Margaret Attack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 85. This is the first volume which critically explored the representation of the events of May 68 in fiction and film, paying particular attention to the role of the socio-political context with regards to artistic creation of the period.

¹⁴ Concerning post-1990 French women's writing, multiple monographs and edited collections of essays have been published, offering a broader panorama of the field and multiple aspects of women's literature. See for instance (in chronological order): *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002).

Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?, ed. by Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002).

Colette Sarrey-Strack, *Fictions contemporaines au féminin: Marie Darrieussecq, Marie NDiaye, Marie Nimier, Marie Redonnet* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).

Parcours de femmes: Twenty Years of Women in French, ed. by Maggie Allison and Angela Kershaw (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature, ed. by Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

Experiment and Experience: Women's Writing in France 2000-2010, ed. by Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013).

Aventures et expériences littéraires: écritures des femmes au début du vingt-et-unième siècle, ed. by Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014).

¹⁵ Gill Rye, 'New Women's Writing in France', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 10 (2002), 165-75 (p. 168).

Literary celebrations of the body, which later came to characterise women's writing of the 1970s, encouraged women to (re)explore the connection with their bodies, and as such, these (literary) bodily reconnections pointed towards a certain re-appropriation of their bodies by women.¹⁶ Whilst the writing of the body has since remained a strong feature of women's writing, the celebratory approach has been replaced by more "realist" and somewhat "painful" accounts of bodily life. Some of the more challenging (even shocking and abject) representations of the body by French women writers are analysed in *Focalizing the Body*. This special issue of the journal *Nottingham French Studies* offers, for instance, an exploration of intersections between otherness and corporeality (via bodies deemed deviant), bodily trauma (in narratives of childbirth) and female sexuality.¹⁷ In the Introduction to the special issue, Rye and Tarr explain how some of these representations 'have been deemed scandalous', caused 'public furore' and challenged feminist interpretation.¹⁸ Moreover, it should be noted that these texts have also opened up new and creative avenues to re-think existing models of embodiment and identity; I will demonstrate that the authors whose fictions I explore in this thesis also challenge in their own ways the boundaries of the concept of corporeal identity – subjectivity and being-in-the-body – and also those within literary representation.

Explorations of (the relationship between) notions of identity, self-other relations and the writing of the body are key themes of investigation for women writers in the 1990s. In Rye and Worton's volume three major themes (and their interconnected explorations) – the writing of the body, identity and trauma – emerge amongst the analyses of texts by female authors such as Christine Angot, Marie Darrieussecq, Agnès Desarthe and Leïla Sebbar.¹⁹ Rye and Worton underline that 'in the intellectual climate of the late twentieth

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous coined the term *écriture féminine* (in: Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975), 39-54.) As Rye and Worton explain, this literary practice really belonged to the highly politicised awakening of literary production by women. Rye and Worton, 'Introduction', p. 5.

¹⁷ Susan Ireland, 'Deviant Bodies: Corporeal Otherness in Contemporary Women's Writing', in *Focalizing the Body*, ed. by Rye and Tarr, 31-51.

Gill Rye, 'Registering Trauma: The Body in Childbirth in Contemporary French Women's Writing', in *Focalizing the Body*, ed. by Rye and Tarr, 92-104.

Lisa Downing, 'Baise-moi or the Ethics of the Desiring Gaze', in *Focalizing the Body*, ed. by Rye and Tarr, 52-65.

¹⁸ Rye and Tarr, 'Introduction', p. 1.

¹⁹ Marion Sadou, 'Christine Angot's *autofictions*: literature and/or reality?', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, ed. by Rye and Worton, pp. 171-81.

century and early twenty-first century, [...] the very notion of the subject has been radically called into question'.²⁰ In their volume *Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?*, Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers have gathered multiple essays which explore women writers' continued interrogation on notions of subjectivity in contemporary France. Often, these are interwoven with explorations of female sexuality and writing of the body, as is the case with Virginie Despentes and differently with H el ene de Monferrand.²¹ More recently in volumes on women's writing in the twenty-first century, the exploration of the relationship between notions of identity, self-other relations and the body remain major features identified by critics.²²

The multifarious crises in the 1990s in France and processes of social transformation and diversification have brought forward issues relating to the place, visibility and interaction with the Other, which women writers have captured in their texts and their new approach to bodily representation. These authors also wrote at the time when the notion of the family was in the process of being (re)shaped, and their reflection on these changes and on modifications to family relations feature in their work. Family dynamics, and interactions between its members, represent a recurring backdrop in the fictions I analyse, especially as these are dictated by sets of rules that fundamentally control subjects in multiple areas of social existence (and permeate the family sphere).

Shirley Jordan, 'Saying the unsayable: identities in crisis in the early novels of Marie Darrieussecq', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, ed. by Rye and Worton, pp. 142-53.

Sarah Alyn Stacey, "'On ne s'entendait plus et c' tait parfait ainsi'" (They could no longer hear each other and it was just fine that way): misunderstandings in the novels of Agn s Desarthe', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, ed. by Rye and Worton, pp. 106-17.

Margaret A. Majumdar, 'The subversion of the gaze: Sh razade and other women in the work of Leila Sebbar', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, ed. by Rye and Worton, pp. 195-206.

²⁰ Rye and Worton, 'Introduction', p. 8.

²¹ Shirley Jordan, "'Dans le mauvais go t pour le mauvais go t?" Pornographie, violence et sexualit  f minine dans la fiction de Virginie Despentes', in *Nouvelles  crivaines*, ed. by Morello and Rodgers, pp. 121-39.

Lucille Cairns, 'Dissidence sexuelle, conservatisme social? La mise en  criture du lesbianisme chez H el ene de Monferrand', in *Nouvelles  crivaines*, ed. by Morello and Rodgers, pp. 215-32.

²² See for instance: Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy, 'The Human-Animal in Ananda Devi's Texts: Towards and Ethics of Hybridity?', in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France*, ed. by Daml  and Rye, pp. 127-40.

Alison Rice, "'Etrang res   elles-m mes": l'immigration en France chez les nouvelles  crivaines francophones', in *Aventures et exp riences litt raires*, ed. by Daml  and Rye, pp. 213-29.

Marie-Claire Barnet and Edward Welch's *Affaires de famille* is a broad critical exploration of representations of the family in literature, film and theory.²³ Articles in the volume explore the notion of the family in conjunction with, amongst others, the theme of connection with others, shame and tragedy.²⁴ In the Introduction to the volume, Barnet writes that the notion of the family – or, following the author's 'insistance [...] sur] la pluralité: les familles'²⁵ – has evolved under the influence of recent social legislation and advances in medical sciences. In *Narratives of Mothering* (2009), Rye reads these recent advances in reproductive technologies as a contributing factor to the creation of new family patterns, observing the gradual superseding of the conventional nuclear family by other family structures (single mothers, stepfamilies, same-sex families for example).²⁶ Reflections upon the potential legalisation of gestational surrogacy led the French Assemblée nationale to consult the association Choisir la cause des femmes,²⁷ who reaffirmed their position against 'la location des ventres'.²⁸ Their report concerning the 'véritable conditionnement social'²⁹ relating to reproduction in France echoes my analysis in Chapter 4, where I argue that reproduction as a social institution works to impose rules and effects rejection when reproduction is

²³ *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory*, ed. by Marie-Claire Barnet and Edward Welch (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007).

Although not strictly focusing on women's writing post-1990, I still include *Affaires de famille* in the present literature review as an important source of critical material for my study. It is of particular interest to me as in the following chapters in this thesis, the family is often the backdrop for multiple identity interrogations and self-other relations in the texts I analyse.

²⁴ Michael Sheringham, 'The Law of Sacrifice: Race and the Family in Marie Ndiaye's *En famille* and *Papa doit manger*', in *Affaires de famille*, ed. by Barnet and Welch, pp. 23-37.

Lorraine Day, 'Ordinary Shameful Families: Annie Ernaux's Narratives of Affiliation and (Mis)alliance', in *Affaires de famille*, ed. by Barnet and Welch, pp. 121-35.

Gill Rye, 'Family Tragedies: Child Death in Recent French Literature', in *Affaires de famille*, ed. by Barnet and Welch, pp. 267-81.

²⁵ Marie-Claire Barnet, 'Introduction', in *Affaires de famille*, ed. Barnet and Welch, pp. 9-20 (p. 14).

²⁶ Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p. 16.

²⁷ The association 'Choisir la cause des femmes' (now an NGO) was founded in 1971 by Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir. Initially campaigning for the legalisation of abortion, their focus has been the defence of the rights of women in contemporary France.

²⁸ Gisèle Halimi and Barbara Vilain, 'Notre corps n'est pas une marchandise', in *Numéro spécial élections européennes: Les politiques s'engagent* (= *Choisir la cause des femmes* [Special issue], 106 (May 2009). <http://www.choisirlacausedesfemmes.org/uploads/documents/Choisir_106OK.pdf> [accessed 15 January 2015], p. 12.

Halimi and Vilain also published in the following section (p. 13) entitled 'GPA: Manifeste pour la défense des plus vulnérables' a petition which denounces 'L'exploitation des femmes', 'La promotion du "tout génétique"' (dangerous prioritisation of "pedigree" of children) and 'L'enfant: "le grand oublié"'. The association, as well Louise L. Lambrichs, are signatories of this petition.

²⁹ Halimi and Vilain, 'Notre corps n'est pas une marchandise', p. 12.

not as expected. In the following chapters, I will show that the controlling power of the widespread medical discourse in our approach to the body influences the human subject's understanding of his/her own body (and the bodies of others) during the multiple episodes of the human lifecycle, indeed affecting approaches to reproduction, and also to illness and old age. Control takes social, cultural, literary and institutional forms and does not have to involve state violence or weapons.

1.3 Monstrosity in French women's writing since the 1990s: selecting my monsters

It would not be hyperbolic to say that amongst the wealth of texts published by women writers since the 1990s, a number of them have explored the theme of the body in conjunction with monstrosity, metamorphosis and hybridity. In their own way, they have all contributed to the exploration of the human subject and identity, and the contemporary society in which they are set, and for this reason all have some degree of relevancy to my study. However, the demands set by the nature of this research project, as well as those linked with the definition of my argument, have led me to establish specific criteria that would frame the corpus of study. Therefore, whilst presenting some key contemporary texts on monstrosity, I shall simultaneously explain my rationale for selecting those I explore in this thesis.

The first point to be exposed is that in the texts I will explore, monstrosity is mediated via the body and the gestures of the monstrous character. However, extreme representations of the body, as observed in the hypersexualised bodies in, for example, Virginie Despentes's *Baise-moi* (1993) or Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001), do not automatically entail monstrosity. My focus specifically lies at the intersection between monstrosity and the writing of the body; contrary to my take, monstrosity has also been utilised to evoke behavioural abnormality as with the figure of the monstrous criminal or in instances of sexual deviancy.³⁰ Had I followed this line of inquiry, texts by Christine Angot would have provided numerous cases to investigate. Secondly, the double perspective of monstrosity I presented before (from that of the

³⁰ In my study, monstrosity evokes multiple forms of (rejection of) difference and how authors have portrayed them via characters who display monstrous bodies and gestures. In the course of my textual explorations of such monstrous subjects, I will also encounter other forms of monstrosity (linked with morality and criminality), and while I will acknowledge their presence and role in the stories, they will not form part of the focus of my analysis of monstrous characters.

context which rejects, and that of the monstrous subject) entails the presence of a social institution to impose corporeal rules on individuals. In my study, these institutions are defining features of the French societal system. For this reason, the exploration of hybridity in conjunction with the body, ethnicity and animality in Mauritian society by Ananda Devi (*Moi, l'Interdite* (2000) or *Le Sari vert* (2011)) has fallen outside the national confines of my study. Finally, authors in my corpus have resorted to monstrosity as a way to explore how individuals juggle with corporeal demands and normalisation, and the social and personal alienation caused by rejection. The subject is labelled as monstrous when he/she fails to meet the corporeal standards of a definite social structure. I argue that the social/institutional need to control the subject via the body becomes increasingly urgent when the subject is prone to bodily transformations. The corporeal changes, if evoked via monstrous metamorphoses in the texts I explore, all remain metaphorical and offer creative interpretations of the known experiences of human embodied life. Therefore, the characters of the witch and the mermaid in Marie N'Diaye's *La Sorcière* (1996) and *La Naufragée* (1999) have not been subjects in my monstrous investigation.

I shall now briefly turn to a text that has become a landmark in women's writing in France, and arguably influenced the way female authors (and readers) think about monstrosity in relation to metamorphosis and the body. Marie Darrieussecq's first novel, *Truismes* (1996) offers an abundance of bodily monstrosities: Darrieussecq's work is indeed concerned with the extreme experiences surrounding the body of the heroine, and the issues of gender roles in the fictive patriarchal dystopian society of a near future. As Shirley Jordan has noted, it pictures a polysemic body,³¹ a platform to represent the female body when confronted with the worst experiences of menstruation, abortion, and sexual abuse for instance, and also of physical metamorphosis. Amélie Nothomb's 'fascination with the cultural meanings of the female body' and with 'culturally constructed conceptions of the beautiful and the monstrous' has been compared to Darrieussecq's 'in terms of [the] vigorous dissociation of her work from French women's body writing of the 1970s and 1980s'.³² However, the demarcation between the four authors in my corpus and Darrieussecq lies in the fact that the characters I explore always retain their full humanity. While Darrieussecq's heroine metamorphoses into a sow, all of the physical transformations I explore in my texts

³¹ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 80.

³² Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, pp. 256-57.

evoke known human experiences (such as illness and old age). In *Truismes*, the character alternates between states, and fluctuates between the human and animal realms; in my investigation of the monstrous, hybridity (between human, animal and plants) points rather to the dangerous crossing of bodily boundaries and to the psychological perturbations caused by uncertain self-other delimitations. The transformations I explore belong to the realms of known human experiences, rather than to the fantastic, and conserve a certain level of “realism”.³³ In *Truismes*, the transformations are realised, which gives concrete form to some issues dealt with by the author. This process, which literalises monstrosity very clearly, has also provided other authors with a platform for reflecting upon other bodily and existential issues. Although the rather dramatic transformations in *Truismes* find a less public form of expression in the texts by my four authors, their theatricality has certainly fostered in my reading the desire to unpack the meaning of these highly visual bodies in situations of emergency. Finally it must be said that the monstrous transformation in *Truismes* is a very obvious way of commenting on the position of women in patriarchal, right-wing dystopian France. Indeed, my chosen texts may well owe images and ideas to Darrieussecq’s novel, but it is important to note that they tackle them differently, less dramatically and less literally.

The chapters which compose my study investigate four case studies chosen to explore different aspects of monstrosity, and just as they owe ideas and images to other texts by other women writers since 1990, they do not intend to be exhaustive. The four authors in my corpus have chosen to problematise societal and individual anxieties, and subsequently crystallised them in the multifarious monstrous shapes with which they have populated their stories. These “bodies in writing” inform us about the way people perceive and interact with their own bodies, as well as with each other, the body and gestures of the other often representing the first immediate platform of communication. My exploration of monstrous characters will allow me to study the recent changing models of individual identities and self-other relations especially when these are framed by the (corporeal and behavioural) expectations of a definite social context. I explore how these bodies are “treated” in specific sub-divisions of society – in fictive representations of educational and health establishments, and within the family

³³ In Chapter 4 I explore the figure of the clone in Lambrichs’s *A ton image*, whom I posit as a fully human subject. If cloning is not strictly a known experience of the human subject as of now, the technology to perform human cloning exists even if it has not taken place for ethical as well as scientific reasons.

environment – and investigate how corporeal norms are first imposed on the subject and then willingly perpetuated by the individual.

In selected texts by Detambel, Lambrichs, Nobécourt and Nothomb, the monstrous characters are approached from the “outside” and from the “inside”. They are not the foreigner in the story but placed centre stage, characters in their own rights embedded in a (narrative) context which essentially creates the “monstrousness” of the subject. It is my position that these four women authors give a (new) voice to monstrosity. I argue that this (new) voice to monstrosity is crystallised in specific narrative voices, and in their dual approach (from the “inside” and the “outside”) which enables a vision of the context that “makes” the monster, as well as an insight from the perspective of the monstrous subject who, rejected from his/her social context, begins a process of self-rejection. However, it must be noted that this novel approach does not simply constitute a straightforward reversal of previous takes on the monstrous, which traditionally considered the viewpoint of the rejecting side. In my study, I do not merely propose a doubled investigation but one that considers an exploration of “each” side in the light of the concerns of the other. The monster and the context, as well as the monster and the subject, overlap and essentially form a whole, and for this reason should be, as far as is possible, explored in relation with each other.

My corpus has been selected because the novels and novellas that I read in the following four chapters of this thesis offer an illuminating yet complex approach to monstrosity. One aspect of this novelty lies in the proximity that these authors propose between humanity and monstrosity. Far from suggesting a harmonious proximity, the monstrous subjects point on the contrary to the uncertainties in human identity. It is my position that the monstrous constitutes a unique lens to explore this inherent boundlessness of the human subject, as its apogee is reached during transitional periods in life, whenever the individual is undergoing diverse physical and physiological perturbations (be they natural or induced). The monstrous erupts just at this juncture: when the changing body that must be controlled begins a process of resistance, and fails to meet the societal rules on which the place of the subject depends.

1.4 The monster in theory

This section in the Introduction is dedicated to presenting how monstrosity has been understood and utilised in theory. I shall present my approach to the monstrous through an array of definitions, which will lead me next to discuss some specificities in the

vocabulary. This survey of interpretations of and approaches to monstrosity will allow me to determine at the end of my next section which theoretical approach to the monstrous will provide the most useful tools for reading monstrous subjects in the literary texts in my study. Moreover, this exploration of the monster in theory aims to outline my take on monstrosity as it is evoked through the body and the gestures of the monstrous subject.

1.4.1 How to approach the monster?

Numerous theorists of monstrosity have attempted to approach the monster by proposing a definition of this word; this section presents and discusses some of the most relevant definitions for my study. I would argue that it is first necessary to turn to the etymology of the word “monster”. In *Embodying the Monster* Shildrick stresses that ‘The Latin roots of the word “monster” are rich in associations, suggesting both *monstrare* – to show, and *monere*, to warn’.³⁴ From this emanate ideas of display, exhibition, revelation and discovery (and by extension physical appearance), and on the other hand concepts of disguise, hiding, and even make-believe. However, the second association implied by the Latin root *monere* reveals the possibility of danger and maybe surprise. Would it be that (the very vision of) the monster is hazardous in itself, or rather that what it shows would shake our beliefs and even self-integrity? Are monsters objects of treachery and maybe optical illusion? Are they contagious? In *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, Laura Lunger Knoppers notes that *monstrum* refers to ‘that which is worthy of warning’ while *monstrare* is not only to show, but also ‘to point to that which is worthy of warning’.³⁵ For Jeffrey Jerome Cohen ‘the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” and “that which warns”’.³⁶ These readings of the etymological roots of the term disclose an unsure relation between the monster and others, as well as communication between the two groups. On the one hand, the monster is visually appealing and attracts (an “exciting” or “forbidden” attraction verging on repulsion)³⁷ because of its amazing

³⁴ Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 12.

³⁵ Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, ‘Introduction’, in *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, (Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 3.

³⁶ Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, p. 4.

³⁷ Cohen writes, ‘Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space.’ I

corporeality, it is daring (it is a projection and embodiment of socially unacceptable desires) and it challenges the observer to see otherness differently. On the other hand, I note a shift from “showing” to “being seen as”, when the monster becomes an object of categorisation by its entourage, moving from the object of curiosity to the embodiment of a threat, and inciting the risk of rejection (of the monster, and if you look/ behave like a monster). More generally speaking, it is that which distances itself from the standards of normality that draws attention. I would argue that the monster is a social construction/embodiment: it is always linked to an individual, to a society. It represents a deviance from an established order and system, a deviance that is embodied and acted, and therefore identifiable from/by the outside, stressing the importance of a normalised physical appearance and the respect for individual positions (roles). Indeed, more than being a deviant, the monster defies the system in place: it threatens its (corporeal) rules, and points to the fragility of its borders as well as to the unsustainability of the fixed (non-evolving, constricting) definitions of the human subject. I would also posit the representation of the monstrous as an invitation to rethink the current norms surrounding the body, and more generally those governing our attitudes towards the encompassing of difference. The study I propose endeavours to approach the monster from the perspective of its entourage and that of the rejected entity, and explore the dynamics of the exchanges imposed by particular systems of (corporeal) rules struggling to contain difference.

Historically, the separation between the monster and others has relied on classification and on attempts to establish a (scientific or morphological) distance between the human and the monster. We find such an instance in *Embodying the Monster* when Shildrick writes that:

In his hugely influential *Natural History* (1961), first circulated in AD77, the Roman writer and traveller Pliny the Elder lists over fifty such races, which range from the recognisably human [...] to the morphological confusion of two other notable Indian races.³⁸

The census of these various races and creatures testifies of the need to categorise them as different from humans and from the self: they are the Other against which normality

would however question Cohen’s claim of a possibility for a monster ‘contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization’. Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, p. 17.

³⁸ Shildrick, p. 15

can be verified.³⁹ Naming the Other is a way of establishing the necessary distance between unrelated entities. In the following citation, Shildrick aptly captures the historical connection and separation between human subjects and instances of the monstrous. She writes that,

The concept of the monstrous and the figure of the monster have haunted western history from its earliest records. Whether in the popular cultural legacy of ancient Greek myth, in travellers' tales of early imperialist and colonialist encounters, in the so-called freak shows, and the enduring tradition of horror stories and films, or in the more rarefied context of the medical theory of classical age, the European Enlightenment, or contemporary high-tech biomedical science, the category of the monster is of enduring fascination.⁴⁰

Shildrick's approach to the monstrous is relevant to my exploration of monstrous subjects especially as, as in the quote cited above, she stresses the antithetical relationship between the monster and the fear it creates, and also the almost inexplicable attraction and fascination it arouses in its contemporaries, observers and analysts. More importantly, she reminds us of the omnipresence of these monstrous figures throughout the ages, starting from Greek mythology. Going back to the original definitions of the term "monster", the Oxford English Dictionary determines four main categories of understanding the word. It is firstly linked to mythology, hybridity, fear and the imaginary; and secondly to physical deformation, ugliness and size. The third category entails the concept of the extraordinary and the unnatural, and the last one brings forth ideas of physical transformation. Standing out from the ideas I have proposed so far are hybridity and physical deformation/transformation, which corroborate a common and immediate envisioning of the word "monster". Equally, as Elizabeth Grosz writes,

Monsters involve some kind of doubling of the human form, a duplication of the body or some of its parts. The major terata recognised throughout history are largely monsters of excess, with two or more heads, bodies, or limbs; duplicated sexual organs.⁴¹

The monstrous can be linked with excess, and also with hybridity. As first cited at the beginning of this Introduction, the concept of cross-species/gender creatures has been

³⁹ "'Teratology' refers to the study of monsters. It is the study of abnormality and deviancy. Both marvels and freaks, monsters are the fascinating other against which the normal can be constituted.' Cited in: Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer* (Routledge: London and New York, 1997) p. 93, who refers to Elizabeth Grosz, 'Freaks', *Social Semiotics* 1(1991), 22-38.

⁴⁰ Shildrick, p. 9.

⁴¹ Grosz, 'Freaks', p. 36.

most interestingly explored by Curti in her *Female stories, female bodies*, where she writes that,

Strange unfamiliar shapes, freakish bodies, disquieting forms and hybrid creatures have been creeping into women's narratives, putting in question the frontier between foulness and loveliness, the human and the animal, me and you, female and male. In mythology, there have been many such hybrids on the female side – Medusa, the Gorgons, the Sphinx, mermaids, harpies and chimeras – surpassing the rather kindly satyrs, centaurs and such like, in numbers and wickedness.⁴²

The analysis of these flexuous entities in their specific contexts could thus provide an insight into the meaning of their embodiment and the expression of their difference. To read these new embodiments, I study the standards of 'foulness and loveliness' as symbolic representatives of the binary rules of acceptance/rejection of a subject based on their physical appearance. The frontiers between 'the human and the animal' and 'female and male' evoke hybridity and suggest new embodiments. These blurred frontiers similarly evoke the merging of the subject with some exterior/invading entity (suggesting abjection), later played out in the indistinctive separation between the 'me and you'. Curti's quote is of the utmost relevance here as it encapsulates the concepts of monstrosity and hybridity, and gives another take on the relationship between monsters and Mythology. Indeed,

Metamorphosis and hybridity are always linked to mythological figures, such as chimeras, mermaids and amazons, which are mostly the result of the contamination of human with animal.⁴³

With this we understand that these monsters belong to popular (and mythological) folk tales and legends, where the monsters, despite the horror of hybridity, were somewhat comforting because they could be located. However colourful and imaginary their descriptions, their physicality was defined even if actual sightings of those monsters must obviously have been rare indeed. In any case, the belief that these monsters had ever existed (or still did) placed them outside of the self: their corporeality is my assurance that they are not (inside) "me".⁴⁴ However as Shildrick argues,

⁴² Curti, p. 107.

⁴³ Curti, pp. 124-25.

⁴⁴ See for instance Barbara Creed's discussion on the internalisation of sins and the issue of borders inside/outside. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 41-42.

It is not simply that monsters – strangers in general – disrupt the usual rules of interaction in that their cultural distance may be offset by physical proximity, but that they may not be outside at all. Although they are always there in our appraisal of the external world, they are also the other within.⁴⁵

From mythology and teratology to psychotherapy, the monster puzzles with its propensity to blur boundaries and to shift between realms. In the quote above, the issue of the (internal) frontier between the self and another entity within is hereby raised. This brings about the threat of interruption of difference, which constitutes a crucial element to Shildrick’s approach to the monstrous, and to my analysis of monstrosity in literary texts. This survey of interpretations of and approaches to monstrosity has allowed me to introduce several theoretical approaches, and to identify Shildrick as the most relevant theorist of monstrosity for this study. I argue that Shildrick’s theory allows for several envisionings of the monster, which will allow productive discussions of monstrosity in the following chapters. Indeed, in Shildrick’s approach, the monster is a figure imagined and born in human societies, and rejected from them; the monstrous also emerges to point to people’s fears and anxieties about the external world and about themselves. In the following sections, I continue the theoretical discussion alongside Shildrick’s theory of monstrosity, as it will provide the most useful tools for the analysis of monstrous subjects (monstrous bodies and gestures) in my study.

1.4.2 *Monster/monstrous*

In this thesis my exploration of the monstrous in the texts by my four chosen authors runs parallel to a reading of Shildrick’s *Embodying the Monster*. I begin with definitions, especially with regards to those between the words “monster” and “monstrous”. Here is how Shildrick puts it:

Although the image of the monster is long familiar in popular culture, from the earliest recorded narrative and plastic representations through to the cyborg figures of the present day and future anticipation, it is in its operation as a concept – the monstrous – that it shows itself to be a deeply disruptive force.⁴⁶

While some would relegate monsters to the sole category of folklore, the derived epithet “monstrous” is not restricted to the obvious question of the “reality” or “existence” of the monster. It conveys however the abundant association of myth and fantastic

⁴⁵ Shildrick, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Shildrick, p. 1.

(iconography), shared popular imagination and reactions of somewhat ambivalent amazement as the monster repulses *and* attracts the observer. If it possesses the qualities of the monster, the “monstrous” also evokes otherness and effectively rejection; beyond rational fear, the reactions it triggers are some of unconscious fear and repulsion. The monstrous not only informs about the physicality of the one viewed as different, it speaks about the criteria and the society that performed such rejection, and about its subjects’ own relationship with issues of their own body, self, and relation with others.

1.4.3 *The monstrous body*

In this thesis, I explore literary representations of monstrous subjects whose monstrosity is evoked through the body and the gestures of the individual. To explore images of bodily monstrosity, I therefore rely on theoretical analyses of the monstrous that are similarly preoccupied with the corporeality of the subject deemed monstrous. The title of Shildrick’s study announces from the outset a preoccupation for the physicality of the monster; indeed ‘embodying the monster’ can be understood as possessing the corporeal attributes that makes one (look like) a monster. Another interpretation of the meaning of this term may relate to the bestowal of a body to (the concept of) the monster. In any case, the body is the focus of gaze and analysis. As I aim to show in my thesis, the monstrous body is an incarnation of the limits of the physically acceptable in our contemporary society; it prompts a discussion on the normalisation of bodies (via discipline and control) and the issue of tolerance towards otherness. It is the locus of the expression of contemporary anxieties projected onto (the fear of) the monster.

Shildrick situates her study within the recent move in philosophy towards a reincorporation of the corporeal in the understanding of the human subject. Contributing to the overall body of work by recent feminist theorists, Shildrick sets out to

extend that reassessment to take account of differently excluded others with a focus on those who are categorised as monstrous, not just as the feminine, or the racial other, but also those who are physically disabled or whose bodies radically disrupt morphological expectations.⁴⁷

She underlines the limitations of the binary structure of the western logos in which a system of inclusion/exclusion is applied to the visually different subject, the “other” which escapes normative identity. However, when this other cannot be fully alienated

⁴⁷ Shildrick, pp. 1-2.

and rejected, when it sits uncomfortably on the boundary of the proper and the improper, it upsets the frontiers and the very system which attempted to cast it away.

Recent re-evaluations of the structuring models of ontology, epistemology and ethics have revolved around embodied difference. But to Shildrick, despite a focus on body and difference, they have only managed to further reiterate corporeal normalisation, and failed to move beyond the binary code of sameness and difference. The concept of the monstrous outreaches such shortcomings: it destabilises the reductive binary structure of the western logos and the rules of normative embodiment that define the individual in its selfhood. Shildrick explains:

So long as the monstrous remains the absolute other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems; in other words it is so distanced in its difference that it can clearly be put into an oppositional category of not-me.⁴⁸

The absence of links between the self and the monster renders the latter inoffensive to the former. Shildrick continues,

Once, however, it begins to resemble those of us who lay claim to the primary term of identity, or to reflect back aspects of ourselves that are repressed, then its indeterminate status – neither wholly self nor wholly other – becomes deeply disturbing.⁴⁹

Shildrick sums up her argument by revealing that, ‘In short, what is at stake is not simply the status of those bodies which might be termed monstrous, but the being in the body of us all’.⁵⁰ The four authors studied in my project depict just such ambivalence in their texts. The rejection of the monstrous is as much an exclusion of the physically different other as it is an attempt to rid the self of its sins and failing, but also fears and defects.

Concerning the relationship between the (different) subject and society, a close reading of Foucault’s *Surveiller et punir* will reveal that the disciplinary institution controls its members via the localised action of its power on the individual body. What is more, Shildrick explains that ‘what is at stake in a politics of identity and difference is the security of borders that mark out the places which are safe and which are unsafe, and who is due moral consideration and who is not’.⁵¹ The disciplinary institution

⁴⁸ Shildrick, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁹ Shildrick, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Shildrick, p. 5.

instantiates the founding principles of the binary structure of the western logos and determines the place of the subject – either inside or outside the institution, as well as within its walls – according to corporeal factors. Interestingly, Shildrick reveals in her historical overview of the western understanding of the monster, a common desire to ‘categorise and explain monstrosity through the pathology of abnormal corporeality’.⁵² This shows both the rationalisation of the monstrous and its localisation on the body, and the subsequent medical categorisation of this corporeality as “not normal” endowed with a potential for correction (illness provides the motif for the control of the sick and potentially contagious body).

However, as the full rejection of the monster is always incomplete, it simultaneously questions the security of the boundaries and the validity of the principles that created them. Conversely, ‘The responses of disavowal of and identification with the monstrous arise equally because we are already without boundaries, already vulnerable’.⁵³ What arises from this is an evident impossibility to fully dissociate with the monstrous. The monstrous belongs to us: as our creation⁵⁴ (to Cohen, ‘Monsters are our children’),⁵⁵ and as a part of us, but a part that the current system of thought does not allow to incorporate, and which therefore must be rejected outside the protective boundaries of the institution, and those of the human psyche.

The monster is not just abhorrent, it is also enticing, a figure that calls to us, that invites recognition. Simultaneously threat and promise, the monster, as with the feminine, comes to embody those things which an ordered and limited life must try, and finally fail, to abject.⁵⁶

Kristeva’s theories on abjection in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* will provide the psychoanalytic insight for reading the monstrous abject subject and the dynamics of rejection. Further than the foreseen failure to abject the monstrous, my aim is to relate the obligation to self-reject as a reflection of the outside (social) pressure to exclude the monstrous in order to protect the integrity of the subject and reinforce its boundaries.

1.4.4 The monstrous, the female, and women’s writing

⁵² Shildrick, pp. 3-4.

⁵³ Shildrick, p. 6.

⁵⁴ See also Barbara Johnson who writes on the link between monstrosity and (literary) creation: ‘What is at stake in Frankenstein’s workshop of filthy creation is precisely the possibility of shaping a life in one’s own image: Frankenstein’s monster can thus be seen as a figure for autobiography as such.’ Johnson, p. 146.

⁵⁵ Cohen, ‘Monster Culture’, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Shildrick, p. 5.

The association between the feminine and the monstrous emanates from a link with the maternal and reproduction,⁵⁷ which in turns brings about the fear, attraction *and* repulsion⁵⁸ of incomplete separation⁵⁹ and the abject as a repercussion of unclear self-other (psychic) boundaries. Reproduction and the mother-child unbroken bond are linked with the monstrous feminine, and more precisely the monstrosity of the female body in our ability to know it, to determine its boundaries. The female body is also the locus for the expression of bodily monstrosity in Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine*. The author goes through various female-specific experiences that cannot be *known*⁶⁰ to man (via the knowledge of embodied experience), despite the patriarchal order which classifies the acceptable (what can be known and controlled) and the unacceptable (what goes beyond our capacity to ever know and to control fully, that is, the monstrous). It would thus seem that the monstrous has "always been" in some measure linked with the feminine.⁶¹ I would argue that the notion of the monstrous feminine indicates the female body as the locus for political work and, as it is my concern here, the locus for ontological interrogations as expressed in literary production. In this thesis I explore the texts by four women writers in French; as noted above, biological reproduction is a bodily experience that I explore, not (solely) as a female-specific

⁵⁷ See for instance Rosi Braidotti who writes: 'Monsters are linked to the female body in scientific discourse through the question of biological reproduction. Theories of conception of monsters are at times extreme versions of the deep-seated anxiety that surrounds the issue of women's maternal power of procreation in a patriarchal society.' Rosi Braidotti, 'Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences', in *Feminist Theory of the Body: A Reader*, ed. by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 290-301, (p. 291).

⁵⁸ Cohen similarly writes about a simultaneous attraction and repulsion as constitutive of the monstrous. Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 17.

⁵⁹ In Chapter 4, I explore the link between the monstrous and the abject through the analysis of the failed separation between the child and the maternal. The daughter cannot follow the process of identification-introjection-separation with the mother and is left in the abject without definite psychic boundaries.

⁶⁰ Similarly Cohen writes: 'From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes.' Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 12.

⁶¹ On the historical link between the monstrous and the feminine, see for instance: Marie-Helene Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993). Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 6: 'The female here serves as the source of the monstrous taint: the male homosexual or queer is monstrous precisely because he embodies characteristics of the feminine'. See also: Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 50: 'The female monster represents, in a way, the symbolic and generative power of monstrosity itself, and particularly of a monstrosity linked to femininity, female sexuality, and female powers of reproduction.' And finally: Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

experience but also as belonging to a human life-stage. Reproduction is seen as a means to control the female body and points to the control of the body at large, by men and the patriarchal order, but also through scientific discourse and the binary categorisation of individuals in society. In my literary exploration of the intersections between reproduction and monstrosity (in Chapter 4), I will show that both male and female characters are subjected to control and to victimisation.

The “traditional” association of the monstrous and the female is, I would argue, an interesting starting point for the exploration of human experiences,⁶² how they are managed by society, experienced by the changing subject and the dynamics of the relation with the entourage. However, it is possible and worth looking further than the monstrous feminine to understand monstrosity as part of the ontological questioning of human transformations. Chapter 4 aside, in the other three chapters of my thesis I explore other life-cycle corporeal stories – the control of the adolescent bodily transformations, illness as it is inscribed on the skin, and old age as it invades the subject and upsets the relation with the notion of the “permanent” self. Both male and female bodies in these stories are posited as the locus for the expression of difference, and as I argue specific expressions of monstrosity; they are human experiences of male or female bodies and they mostly belong to an interrogation of the place of the physically (visually) different subject in fixed structures, and how this fixity goes against the natural mobility linked with human development (and I would argue, the evident fluidity which can come to be labelled as monstrous).

1.4.5 Monstrosity: body and gesture

The failure to secure boundaries – be they within the human psyche or the social institution – is thus linked with the monstrous. According to Shildrick, the vulnerability of the human subject is intimately linked with the concept of the monstrous as both signal an opening of the self onto the other, a ‘transformation of the relation between

⁶² The monstrous has been opposed to the angel and to the beautiful (see respectively: Jean-Marc Terrasse’s article whose title questions the existence of the association: Jean-Marc Terrasse, ‘Does monstrosity exist in the feminine? A reading of Amélie Nothomb’s angels and monsters’, in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonden (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); and *The Beautiful and the Monstrous*, ed. by Amaleena Damlé and Aurélie L’Hostis (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010)). It is thus this “unexpected” association of the monstrous with femininity, more traditionally and historically linked with naivety and submission (an angel, a beauty), that disrupts expectations and reinforces the notion of the monstrous as encompassing extreme antitheses to suggest new perspectives on bodies and individuals.

self and other such that the encounter with the strange is not a discrete event but the constant condition of becoming'.⁶³ Just as much as the monstrous 'always claims us, touches us and implicates us in its own becoming',⁶⁴ the progression of my chapters aims to reflect the connections between the becoming of the monster and the human subject. The exploration of my argument via my devised mode of reading will span across various stages of human becoming through life cycles. From the bodily turbulences of puberty to the eruptive corporeality in sickness, via the (imposed) reproductive body and finally opening onto the future of the ageing body in contemporary western society, I will rely on this "monstrous" approach to decipher the connections between embodied difference, self-rejection and the dynamics of the social institutions that orchestrate them. However, just as much as the monstrous cannot be securely located or enclosed, similarly, the body cannot simply be the locus for its expression.⁶⁵ Monstrosity resonates with (unpredictable) transformations and becoming; it is not a state of being but a flexuous representation of difference and sameness, somewhere between (corporeal) spaces.⁶⁶ In *Monster Theory*, Cohen envisages an approach to the monster 'only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis'.⁶⁷ It is my specific position that the exploration of embodied monstrosity entails an analysis of corporeal difference and the attempt to control⁶⁸ and reject it; it also encapsulates the mobility of the body in the acts and gestures by the monstrous subject, and the constant motion that is linked with the physical and psychological transformation of the becoming of the subject. For these reasons, the monstrous cannot (and must not) be identified through a single expression of abnormality or difference, and this is also why it is open to new reshaping and interrogation.

The understanding of the monstrous is endemic to its (fictive) context; as such it provides an insight into its society's specific anxieties and ontological preoccupations. The reading of these monstrous bodies will inform us of the societies that create and

⁶³ Shildrick, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Shildrick, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Franco Moretti writes about the 'totalizing monster', a monster that even the forceful application of law and order cannot master (Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1983), p. 84).

⁶⁶ Cohen writes: 'the monster's body is both corporeal and incorporeal, its threat is its propensity to shift.' Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 5.

⁶⁷ Cohen, 'Preface', in *Monster Theory*, ed. by Cohen, p. x.

⁶⁸ Damlé explores the figure of the muse through the concept of immutable physicality with artistic objectisation for the control of women. See: Amaleena Damlé, 'Introduction' in *The Beautiful and the Monstrous*, ed. by Damlé and L'Hostis, p. 7.

reject them, and the inability to accept (physical) difference. But it is the issue of incomplete rejection that will point to the necessity to re-think tolerance towards otherness and gesture, through the embodiment of difference, towards new models of integrative being-in-the-world. Cohen writes:

These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.⁶⁹

The demands I have set on the monstrous subject require a specific theoretical framework, which should allow me to explore the imposition of corporeal rules on the subject and the relationship with the physically inapt subject who becomes monstrous. Simultaneously, I will consider how this is received by the subject with regards to his/her body, and how the subject in turn deals with processes of self-rejection.

1.5 Theoretical framework

1.5.1 Reasons and methods for decoding the monstrous body

To explore monstrous figures as I have defined them so far, it has been necessary to design a complex theoretical framework that would allow me to explore firstly how the subject within specific establishments must submit to sets of rules (involving inter-relations between body, place and function), and then what becomes of the subject faced with the imposition of unattainable corporeal norms. This tripodal theoretical framework – which explores how the monstrous is a product of its environmental *and* individual rejection – encompasses a reading of Shildrick's theory on the monstrous, Foucault's analysis of power structures within social institutions, and Kristeva's psychoanalytic theories on abjection. It should however be noted that, while this tripodal theoretical structure constitutes the overarching theoretical framework of the study, it does not feature uniformly in the next four chapters, and the three theories have been used in accordance with the texts explored in each chapter. As I will elucidate in the following chapters, the binding element of the theoretical and critical reading of fictive texts is the monstrous figure, which emerges in an array of forms in the texts. I will analyse multiple representations of monstrous characters in different stages of life,

⁶⁹ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 20.

and explore instances of physical transformation or stagnation, where subjects experience processes of physical hybridisation (with an animal or a plant), genetic manipulation and corporeal degradation. However, the various corporeal transformations that these subjects (made monstrous) undergo are all metaphorical and remain within the realm of human experiences. The “monstrousness” of the subject is created by the limitations within the social context which refuses to account for the individuals outside corporeal norms. Beyond the physical and physiological manipulations of the character within his-her context, my exploration of monstrosity “from within” will revolve around an analysis of the psychological consequences of social rejection. However, before I can explain how psychoanalysis will shed light on my analysis of the monstrous, I will firstly turn to the (fictive) societies in which these monstrous characters are born.

1.5.2 Revealing anomalies in the institution

The texts of my corpus depict instances where the subject is caught between the necessity – and the desire – to self-impose a rigid set of corporeal norms, and the inability – or the lack of willingness – to conform. This is where the monstrous erupts, from the problematic in-betweenness of inside/outside, self/other. Although often posited as the antithesis to the “me”, I have shown before that monstrosity is by definition that which disrupts the very balance of this binary order. The monstrous, which cannot fit within the highly structured binary system of contemporary society, is nonetheless born within its (moral, ethical) boundaries. For these reasons, I have opted for a post-structuralist reading of societal functionings, especially as these appear in recognisable compartments within society (for instance in schools and health care establishments). So far, I have presented in previous sections of this Introduction how the monster has been analysed by critics, and I have explained how my proposed interpretation of the monstrous figure aligns with Shildrick’s theory of the monstrous. This initial explanation represented the first third of my theoretical framework; I will now turn to the second element of my tripodal structure.

My analysis of societal hierarchies will draw on Michel Foucault’s work, a French philosopher and social theorist who studied the articulations of power within society. In *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975), he explored how subjects are controlled within defined compartments, or subsections, of society (which stand as

Foucauldian disciplinary institutions), drawing from the functioning of schools, hospitals and the army. However, as he elaborated, ‘Pas question de faire ici l’histoire des différentes institutions disciplinaires, dans ce qu’elles peuvent avoir chacune de singulier’. His aim was instead ‘de repérer seulement sur une série d’exemples quelques-unes des techniques essentielles qui se sont, de l’une à l’autre, généralisées le plus facilement’. Overall, Foucault’s project seeks to understand this ‘certain mode d’investissement politique et détaillé du corps, une nouvelle “microphysique” du pouvoir’ which he sees as increasingly ‘gagn[ant] des domaines de plus en plus larges, comme si elles tendaient à couvrir le corps social tout entier’.⁷⁰

The subtitle to Foucault’s essay – ‘Naissance de la prison’ – reveals how the author frames his analysis of societal hierarchies around the evolutions of the carceral system. In my project I do not set out to emulate Foucault’s methodology, but fundamental components of the Foucauldian prison still appear *en filigrane* in my reading of fictive social institutions, and are linked to my take of exploring (monstrous) bodies in society.⁷¹ For this reason, I shall explain next how the prison (as a structure with specific rules and spatial arrangements, and also as an abstract concept) can be reunited with other non-punitive establishments within society, and then explore how this has influenced people’s mode of thinking in France, in order to determine resonances with my approach to monstrosity and the disciplinary institution.

Firstly, I focus on how Foucault develops his thesis in *Surveiller et punir*. The first, second and fourth chapters in the book, namely ‘Supplice’, ‘Punition’ and ‘Prison’, offer a critical overview of the evolutions of modes of punishment in modern times (from the eighteenth century). Foucault documents the gradual distancing from

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 163.

⁷¹ Beyond the recurring motif of confinement in my analysis, I note some instances where direct parallels are made with prisons. I here present some instances explored further in the relevant chapters in my thesis. In Nobécourt’s writing, the monstrous character is incarcerated at the end of the story (in a prison or mental institution, this remains unclear). In Lambrichs’s text, the narrator writes the story (of his crime) from a prison cell. In Detambel’s novel, the aged pensioner who flees the retirement home is pictured as an escapee. Finally the last instance I shall mention shows the intimate link between the prison, the institution, and the body of the subject, and also directly resonates with the next point in my Introduction. In Nothomb’s text, when the dancer is evicted from the dance school (because of leg fracture caused by osteoporosis), the doctor who performs her medical assessment is shocked by her extreme thinness, and compares dancers with victims of concentration camps. This comparison appals the ballerina and the reader, and calls on our collective memory and images of physical and psychological degradation. I would also argue that the concentration camp and the school share via their common carceral nature the production of prisoners and victims upon whom the institution imposes strict (corporeal) rules.

the body as the immediate receptacle of justice's sanction (with the abandonment of public executions for instance) towards other, more psychological, forms of sentence. The shift from spectacular to hidden forms of punishment, from the public space to the prison (enclosed) space, is condensed in new methods of sanction relying on 'Discipline' (the title of the third chapter in *Surveiller et punir*) to punish and also tame the subject. Foucault concludes this chapter with the following intertwined interrogations about the mirrored structures of prison and other social institutions,

Que la prison cellulaire, avec ses chronologies scandées, son travail obligatoire, ses instances de surveillance et de notation [...] soit devenue l'instrument moderne de la pénalité, quoi d'étonnant? Quoi d'étonnant si la prison ressemble aux usines, aux écoles, aux casernes, aux hôpitaux, qui tous ressemblent aux prisons?⁷²

Therefore what seems to unite prison and other (non-punitive) institutions is the shared reliance on discipline as a method to enforce punishment and hierarchical order.

Secondly, I shall explore how the philosophy of the prison has permeated not only the organisation of non-punitive institutions, but also the way subjects think around the body in society today. The prison as an institution in society indeed shares more than a structure and functioning with other disciplinary establishments. Another common denominator is the constricted subject, who may also be said to be born from anterior preoccupations with confinement (which I shall briefly trace next). If the socio-political context of the last decades of the millennium played an important part in shaping new attitudes towards the body in society, a similar assessment effectively applies to earlier dramatic historical events in the twentieth century. What are these events and what is their bearing on contemporary perceptions of the body and in the fictive texts I analyse? In *Existential Prisons*, Mary Ann Frese Witt explores how the phenomenon of imprisonment is represented by existentialist writers, and analyses instances of 'literary prisons' in their work.⁷³ In her 'Introduction', the author draws on Foucauldian thought to decipher the means by which modern societies have asserted their power and controlled subjects. In line with Foucault's focus on the body as a refracting surface through which to impose control over the subject, Frese Witt associates the 'deprivation of liberty' with 'the sequestration of the human body in a

⁷² Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 264.

⁷³ Mary Ann Frese Witt, *Existential Prisons: Captivity in Mid-Twentieth-Century French Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985). The author explores the work of Malraux, Camus, Sartre and Genet by focusing on the personal relationship between the authors' own experiences of war and incarceration, as well as on the conceptual similarities with concentration camp literature.

cell'. Prisons – today's 'unique mode of punishment for criminals, political deviants, and other undesirables' – of which World War II concentration camps represent the 'most extreme expression of the relationship between power and enclosure', belong to 'a continuum in the human mind's consciousness of imprisoning space and of forces that imprison'. The author highlights how the preoccupation with confinement in French consciousness has been reflected in literature, and argues that this trait in French literature has been nourished, and arguably exacerbated, in the aftermath of the Holocaust.⁷⁴ Therefore, I would advance that the new approach to writing the body in French women's literature could be situated not only in the more recent changing attitudes to the body (others' bodies, and self-other social interactions), but also as a reflection of a wider social phenomenon. It is born from an anterior shared preoccupation with confinement (in people's minds and in literature) which, similar to the Foucauldian 'unique mode of punishment', in turn posits the body as the locus of the subject's appraisal and by which punishment is mediated.

In a nutshell, I have shown that discipline and confinement as constitutive elements of the prison also appear as fundamentals in other non-punitive institutions. Confinement and discipline form the pillars of the disciplinary institution, whilst the body of the subject is the keystone. In the following four chapters, monstrosity arises when the subject, unable (or unwilling) to meet bodily standards, is rejected by the disciplinary institution. From this perspective, the monstrous represents an anomaly, and must be cast away. However, as I have explained before, monstrosity is that which prevents any attempt to permanently cast away otherness/difference (in a binary sense). Still drawing from the definitions I have assembled before, the monstrous is broadly speaking synonymous with revelation: it speaks of a subject moulded in and by a specific context. Therefore, further than the inappropriateness of the subject, what the monstrous effectively reveals is the inadequacy and the failure of the system of bodily rules based on confinement and discipline.

In the next section, I will sketch the articulations of discipline in the institution, and explore how the institution's assessment of bodily inadequacy is first foisted on the subject and then assimilated by him/her. At this junction sits the third component of my tripodal theoretical framework; my aim will be to present how psychoanalysis can provide a useful tool to analyse self-other relations and instances of self-rejection.

⁷⁴ Frese Witt, pp. 1-2.

1.5.3 From discipline to bodily inadequacy, and self-rejection

I have so far presented how Foucauldian thought will allow me to explore how monstrosity can be triggered through rejection in the disciplinary institution. It is now my concern to expose how I utilise these theories in the next four chapters so as to analyse the treatment of the (monstrous) subject in the multifarious fictive representations of disciplinary institutions in the texts of my corpus. Several interrogations will sustain my analysis: how is discipline initially imposed on the subject? How can we retrace the assimilation of this discipline by the subject? What are the forms and causes of the disciplined subject's alienation?

Chapter 2 in my thesis is dedicated to the theoretical exploration of the disciplinary institution in the oeuvre of one author, Amélie Nothomb. In that chapter, I focus specifically on her novel *Robert des noms propres* as it provides a fictive representation of an educational institution for children and teenagers (the Paris Opera School of dance). I will read Nothomb's take on the disciplinary institution in conjunction with Foucauldian theories, and also discuss the input of the disciplinary system used to manage individuals at the junction between two ages (adolescence) and therefore going through various stages of corporeal changes. In the following three chapters, I will also examine the creation of monstrosity in different representations and versions of the Foucauldian model of disciplinary institution; as in Chapter 2, the (monstrous) subject will also be at a hinge period in the life cycle and undergoing a set of corporeal changes. Throughout the thesis, the monstrous will therefore appear whenever the human subject is constricted by a disciplinary institution which impedes the natural corporeal changes of the human life cycle.

As I have determined before, confinement and discipline are pillars in the institution, and they are the vectors for institutional power and for the control of subjects. As such, the institutionalised subject must first be separated from his/her familiar environment and confined in an establishment before it can be made a docile, disciplined body. According to Foucauldian thought, to control the subject, the institution focuses the application of its discipline on the body of the subject. The techniques for transformation into a docile body entail first of all a permanent surveillance of the subject via a surveillance of the body. At the Opera School of dance, the gaze of teachers, of other students, and of the subject herself, watches over the

body's physical appearance and actions, but similar to the Panopticon, it remains unidentifiable and ubiquitous, and all the more powerful. In line with my approach to the monstrous, the surveillance of the subject's looks and gestures will determine his/her belonging to their social context, in the case of the dancer as well as for other subjects in my following chapters. In the disciplinary institution, surveillance is enabled via the placing of the subject in space and the regulation of time (via timetables and scheduling). This will allow me to explore the links between the body, space and the function attributed to the subject by the rules of the establishment. As I will show in the second chapter, contrary to widespread images of monstrous figures situated outside the margins of society, the monstrous character is born inside the fictive educational institution (in the present case, a dance school). It will be my concern to explore how sets of (bodily) rules work to create a subject obsessed with her body's appearance and ability to perform her role of dancer in order to retain her place and identity within the closed world of classical dance.

I will show that power in the institution is therefore transmitted "downwards" (via discipline and confinement imposed upon the body of the subject) and also across sections within the establishment itself (via surveillance and the normalising gaze). I will also investigate how power becomes "a-corporeal" when discipline need no longer be imposed (by teachers), and students become self-disciplined. The control of subject via the body is therefore not dependent on the presence of an "official" or "physical" structure; I observe in the following two chapters the impact of a disciplining "philosophy" that is constructed around other social institutions. The effectiveness of the disciplinary institution comes from its chameleonic nature, its propensity to adapt across social structures, always relying on the fundamental disciplining of its subjects. In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I rely on the theoretical explanations and conclusions drawn in the second chapter to explore other forms of demarcation and embodiment of discipline imposed on (monstrous) subjects: the family unit. Similar principles of body-place-function will govern the monstrous subject's role and eventual rejection. Finally in the last chapter of this thesis, I return to explore the fictive representation of a fully-fledged institution, in the shape of the retirement home in texts by Régine Detambel. My aim will be to analyse this author's evolving depiction of the disciplinary system in the treatment of old age, as she explores its limits and moves beyond Foucauldian theorisation.

In Chapter 3, the rules work as artificial boundaries to the (body of the) subject and operate various fractures in the relation with the self, which I explore through a reading of Kristeva's theorisation of the concept of abjection. The gradual dispossession of the (control of the) body alienates the subject from his/her own body, especially as the corporeal rules of the institution become unachievable,⁷⁵ and separate the subject from the (disciplined) group, and from him/herself. This attempt to impose rules and limits can be read as a move towards the securing of boundaries – to push back the unwanted individual as much as the unwanted part of the self which must be abjected. Throughout the last three chapters I explore the psychological side of body transformations as these are seen as improper and rejected by a specific entourage. However, this necessity to seal the contours of the body goes against the very motion and bodily and psychological opening implied by the transformations of human becoming. I explore in the thesis the recurring openness linked with corporeal experiences of human life cycles, their 'transgressive and transformative'⁷⁶ qualities, which collide with the (external) imposition of constricting bodily rules in a spatially confining structure.⁷⁷ As the monstrous comes to symbolise that which is posited around various borders and fragilises their securing function, the monstrous subjects I analyse in my texts are similarly threatening to their environment, and can sometimes necessitate extreme policing to "protect" the wider public from their damaging influences.⁷⁸ For the subject, this 'pouvoir qui le *fouille*, le *désarticule* et le *recompose*'⁷⁹ is invading, especially as the docile body becomes self-disciplined and learns to see his/her body differently, as abnormal, and in need of demarcation from the humanistic approach to the permanent self in the unchanged body. My exploration seeks to understand the complex dynamics

⁷⁵ As I explore in each chapter, the functioning of a disciplinary institution and the rules that govern it are specific to the (fictive) context of its application.

⁷⁶ This is a reference to Shildrick who uses these adjectives to qualify the monstrous. Shildrick, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Cohen writes about the monster as indicative of the borders of the acceptable/normal, and as a guardian of these limits. However, I ask, how can the monster guarantee the hermeticity of the frontier when, beyond the stress put on their fragility, it is not possible to contain the monstrous within any (corporeal) space? See: Cohen, 'Monster Culture', pp. 12-16.

⁷⁸ The attempt to curb (physical) monstrosity generally fails and requires an annihilation of the individual, expressed through various levels of physical violence imposed on the monstrous entity.

Cohen presents the monster as a vessel for the exploration of forbidden (bodily) practices; he evokes practices of scapegoating and exorcism as all that is undesirable is transferred onto the body of the monster, and whose destruction in a ritual of elimination works to purge the community. See: Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 17.

⁷⁹ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 162, my emphasis.

of the subject who loses him/herself in the search for a (re)-normalised body and behaviour.

1.6 Summary of the chapters

My study belongs to a contemporary academic investigation of the relationship between the subject and his/her body and society, questioning the current parameters of the human being and notions of sameness/difference, acceptance/rejection. It is also the first study that focuses on the full human life cycle, and that focuses on how monstrosity may erupt in different stages of the human lifespan, as they are represented by post-1990 French women writers.

The characters in the novels of my corpus are all caught between the necessity to fit to the role attributed by their social entourage (be it society in general, an institution or a family unit) and the desire to explore other paths and new forms of embodied experiences. These explorations often entail a wandering outside the rules set up by their roles and social milieu, which in turn bring about experimentations linked with the body. The exploration of new embodiments of human identity through transformation necessarily entails an introduction of the monstrous; in the following chapters, I interrogate the possibility of rebirth through metamorphosis. The question is: are these monstrous entities new ways of being human (through “other” bodies and gestures), or do they signal an attribution of a degrading label? Are these new shapes signs of evolutions or do they point to the social (again, from the part of society, the regulated institution and family) inability to accept (visual) difference? Does/can monstrosity fully belong with the human subject, and conversely, is rejection of the monstrous ever complete?

In this Introduction, I have established the emergence of monstrous subjects in contemporary women’s writing as the response and resistance to the particular socio-political context of the 1990s in France, and as a recent trajectory in new practices of writing the body. In my study, monstrosity is evoked through the body and the gestures of a subject who fails to meet the standards of a specific social institution. The ensuing social rejection triggers the self-rejection of the subject who in turn cannot come to terms with his/her difference. The double approach, from the perspective of the rejecting side, and from that of the monster, allows me to explore the institutionalisation of individuals as a fundamental element of French society, and also the processes of

individual identity (re)configurations for subjects labelled as physically inappropriate. The proximity (which I introduced earlier) between the human subject and the monstrous is evoked in the texts of my corpus in their shared fragility as transforming (monstrous) bodies. My exploration of the monstrous, inscribed in known experiences of human embodied life, is played out via the parallel progression of my argument with events in the human life cycle.

Beginning with the tumults of puberty, I explore in my next chapter a very theatrical instance of bodily transformation. In Chapter 2, I focus on Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres* and the portrayal of a hybrid monster who develops out of the draconian rules imposed on the bodies of ballet dancers. As I will show, the body of the anorexic female adolescent functions as the paradoxical locus for extraordinary (though metaphorical) transformation into a monstrous character who, despite being the product of unachievable institutional rules, cannot remain a member of that very establishment. These rules that disrupt the natural changes occurring during adolescence, in a way prevent the subject from retaining her humanity. I focus next on illness as an event/accident bound to happen at some point in human existence. In Chapter 3, my exploration focuses on the interplay between the physical/physiological modifications caused by a dermatological condition, and the psychological consequences on the identity of the subject. In Chapter 4, reproduction is posited as another possible stage of human life. But in the fiction I read, it is portrayed as a necessary event that can be controlled via the body, for the purpose of a subject and a social order. If reproduction can become an induced event in embodied existence, quite the opposite can be said about the next stage in human life. In my last chapter, old age is feared by society and the subject, who struggle to come to term with the natural processes of ageing.

In the next four chapters of this thesis, the authors in my corpus propose different ways to re-interpret monstrosity; as such, I will show that they give it a new voice. This reassessment of the monstrous will entail an exposition and criticism of the disciplinary processes which impose (impossible) limits and demands registered upon the body, and which inevitably cause social and self-rejection of the visibly different individual deemed monstrous. Indeed, I will show that in the disciplinary institution, the labelling of monstrosity – that is, its perception in terms of otherness and difference – effectively closes down possibilities and avenues for human subjects. Moreover, I will unveil how my four authors suggest in their writing a different approach to the monstrous: as a gateway to the human subject; as a prism for the exploration of other/changing

possibilities of being in the body. As such, these texts open up new avenues to rethink self-other relations, as well as (bodily) difference, as it is experienced by the subject and as it is deciphered on (the bodies of) others. Through their creative portrayals of monstrosity, I will reveal that these authors make it possible (for the reader) to reread monsters' stories, and to think productively about multifarious corporeal identities for human beings.

Chapter 2. Monstrous embodiments within the disciplinary institution in Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres*

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 *The monstrous and the institution: from creation towards expulsion*

My exploration of the monstrous subject in this thesis rests on the recognition that the study of its fictive representations grants a unique insight into the understanding of contemporary notions of self-other relations and identity quests. The study of monstrosity does not merely constitute a reading of/from the margins; it seeks to interrogate the sustainability of the rules which govern social interactions and effect the rejection of some individuals. If, as I have posited in the introductory chapter of this thesis, monstrosity erupts when the boundaries of human subject are threatened, it is also important to remember that what constitutes the accepted or “normal” individual is always pre-determined by the affiliation to a specific social group. Institutions of all types – from school, to the work place and the family – form the fabric of our society: they regiment social interactions and establish the corporeal and behavioural standards of social life. The monstrous, who must be kept at bay, is in fact an embodiment of (or a visual confrontation with) the inappropriateness of social rules and of the vulnerability of the human subject. To demonstrate this point, I focus specifically in this second chapter on the extreme corporeal demands of an institution that shapes but cannot control or contain the monstrous figure that is born within its walls. I will demonstrate how the excessive institutional standards are internalised by the subject, how they cause a transformation (into a monstrous figure) that takes this individual to the limits of human survival and identity, eventually as far as the exclusion from the said institution.

The oeuvre of Amélie Nothomb offers a particularly suitable platform to initiate the literary exploration in my project. Arguably one of the most famous and prolific francophone female authors of her generation, Nothomb is reputed for her eccentric nature and imaginative stories wherein monsters abound. In a recent documentary by Laureline Amanieux and Luca Chiari, Nothomb defines the monster: ‘Le monstre, c’est finalement nous en plus courageux. C’est quelqu’un qui a laissé libre cours à sa

monstruosité, qui a cessé d’être domestiqué par le regard d’autrui.’⁸⁰ Monstrosity is posited here as an inherent part of human nature that requires taming to allow for one’s social existence. In this chapter, I will explore processes of “domestication” in Nothomb’s *Robert des noms propres* (2002),⁸¹ a novel in which the main character Plectrude fulfills her dream of joining the celebrated Paris Opera Ballet School. Classical dance, and the training institution, are reputed to require the epitome of body discipline; in my analysis I explain how Plectrude’s ascent to her dream of becoming a professional *danseuse étoile* entails a shaping of her body and her mind.

In Part Two of this chapter, I lay out the functioning of the fictive establishment and its rules via an exploration of Michel Foucault’s theories on ‘discipline’ as articulated in *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (1975). This will allow me to decipher not only how power is deployed within the school and amongst its students, but also to understand how discipline becomes firstly assimilated by Plectrude (who is turned into a Foucauldian docile body) and eventually self-imposed by all students. Furthermore, as Plectrude takes the already stringent bodily rules of the establishment to another level, she becomes severely affected with anorexia. In Part Three, I will demonstrate how the subject’s fall into anorexia can be read as a figure of submission and resistance within the complex inter-relationship between the disciplinary institution, the dancer and her own body, and I will also investigate the possibility of salvation of the subject. Finally in Part Four, I will question the role of the subject’s metaphorical transformation into a bird, and show how monstrosity can provide an insight into the understanding of anorexia in the novel. The monstrous will emerge as a reactionary embodiment, a denunciation and a call for re-evaluation of the disciplining of the subject through corporeal constriction.

The introduction of this chapter continues with first a presentation of the author and her oeuvre. I will then review in two sections the vast critical literature that has been produced on Nothomb’s writing, within which I situate my own approach. From there I explore the fundamental Nothombian concepts that underpin my analysis in this chapter, so as to introduce my proposed reading on the monstrous in *Robert des noms propres*.

⁸⁰ *Amélie Nothomb, une vie entre deux eaux*, dir. by Laureline Amanieux and Luca Chiari, Empreintes Documentary (Cinétévé and France 5, 12 October 2012).

⁸¹ Amélie Nothomb, *Robert des nom propres* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002). Subsequent references to this text will be from the same edition and page numbers will be provided in brackets in the text.

2.1.2 Presentation of Amélie Nothomb: life, texts, and the media

The daughter of a Belgian diplomat, Amélie Nothomb spent the first years of her life in Japan, and then her childhood and adolescence in several other countries, before eventually settling in Belgium, her family homeland. A literature enthusiast and later a prolific writer, the many stories (read and experienced) of her nomadic childhood shape those she publishes as an author. If language and books were the self-confessed reliable pillars of her early life, her particular relationship with the written world features in her methodical rhythm of daily composition and yearly publication since becoming a published author at the age of twenty-five. Known as ‘l’enfant terrible des Lettres belges’⁸² and ‘la Belge à succès’,⁸³ Amélie Nothomb has been a central figure in the new generation of women writers in France since the last decade of the twentieth century. Since the publication of *Hygiène de l’assassin* in 1992, Nothomb has written a myriad of texts, fictive and autobiographical (many of which are said to remain unpublished today), a play, short stories and song lyrics, selecting one book for her timed autumnal “delivery”⁸⁴ during the French *rentrée littéraire*. The heavy media coverage of her yearly publication not only ensures the exposure of her work⁸⁵ but also sustains her public image, and her stunning hats and self-confessed taste for rotten foods have become ‘Nothombian trademarks’.⁸⁶ Moreover, her desire to perpetuate her peculiar image (via the use of various media)⁸⁷ shows her interest in the creation (and control) of outside images of the self – a (literary) practice to which I shall return later in this chapter.

⁸² Yolande Helm, ‘Amélie Nothomb: “L’Enfant terrible” des Lettres belges de langue française’, *Études Francophones*, 11 (1996), 113-20.

⁸³ Frédéric Beigbeder, ‘Amélie Nothomb crée la vraie polémique de la rentrée’, *L’Express*, 1 September 2005, section Culture <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/acide-sulfurique_810446.html> [accessed 15 January 2015] (para. 4 of 6)

⁸⁴ Amélie Nothomb famously resorts to maternal lexicon to evoke literary creation, and speaks of ‘tomber enceinte’ of a book as she is composing the story. (Nothomb mentions this during spoken interviews).

⁸⁵ Martine Guyot-Bender has explored the role of the web in shaping the future of the literary canon with regards to contemporary literature published in France, and in her article, she explores the role played by fans blogs and websites in discussing and disseminating their interest in Nothomb’s texts and persona. See: ‘Canons in Mutation: Nothomb, Houellebecq et alia on the Net’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 10 (2006), 257-66.)

⁸⁶ Shirley Ann Jordan, ‘Becoming Women: Amélie Nothomb’s Studies in Constraint’, in *Contemporary French Women’s Writing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), Note 2 p. 281.

⁸⁷ On the author’s official website, several televised interviews and other videos can be found in the section “Les bonus”. <<http://www.amelie-nothomb.com/les-bonus-amelie-nothomb/>> [accessed 15th January 2015].

Nothomb is a known graphomaniac, and with already twenty-three published novels, the presence and regularity of this seemingly unstoppable *machine à écrire* has only been matched by the constant interest for her texts by the general public and academia, critics and the media.⁸⁸ A rapid survey of the ongoing study of Nothomb's work in (edited) volumes of articles on contemporary French women's writing denotes the continued academic interest in her creative project.⁸⁹ She is indeed one of the most read and written about authors of her generation. Amongst the four authors studied in this thesis, Amélie Nothomb is the second most prolific (after Régine Detambel). The amount of research that has been published on her texts however outstrips by far that on the work of Detambel, Lambrichs or Nobécourt. In the following two-part literature review on Nothomb's oeuvre, I set out first to present the recurring themes in her texts alongside the main strands in Nothombian critique in order to assess the place and importance monstrosity. In the second half of the literature review, I will focus specifically on previous approaches to the monstrous, and readings of *Robert des noms propres*.

2.1.3 Literature review: situating the monstrous amidst the Nothombian universe

Michel Zumkir has described Amélie Nothomb as 'un monstre littéraire'.⁹⁰ In his book he presents, in an alphabetised portrait of the author, the results of various interviews and investigations whose focus is more the author than her texts, and the links with her persona, popularity and reception of her books. Interestingly, her public persona itself is associated with monstrosity: it is related to oddity (of Nothomb's peculiar image) and to excess (with regards to her prolific production). Monstrosity can also be linked to the high visibility of the author (one almost cannot be oblivious of her). As Michel David writes about Nothomb, 'on la voit partout'.⁹¹ Indeed, beyond featuring in various media to present her books, she also appears "inside" her texts – as a writer, a character, using

⁸⁸ From the outset of her writing career, Amélie Nothomb's novels have been awarded several literary prizes, most notably the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française in 1999 for *Stupeur et tremblements*, the Prix de Flore for *Ni d'Eve, ni d'Adam* in 2007, and the Grand Prix Jean Giono for her overall oeuvre the following year.

⁸⁹ See for instance: *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France; This 'Self' Which is Not One; Aimer et Mourir: Love, Death, and Women's Lives in Texts of French Expression*, ed. by Eilene Hoft-March and Judith Holland Sarnecki (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); *Redefining the Real*; Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing; Nouvelles écrivaines*.

⁹⁰ Michel Zumkir, *Amélie Nothomb de A à Z: Portrait d'un monstre littéraire* (Bruxelles: Le Grand Miroir, 2003).

⁹¹ Michel David, *Amélie Nothomb: Le symptôme graphomane* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 14.

dates meaningful in her own life⁹² – and “outside”, on the carefully designed dust jackets and covers of her books.⁹³ Nothomb is also open about her past life and during interviews she willingly provides dates and personal anecdotes to nourish the stories in her autobiographical texts, challenging the tie between words and images, life and text.⁹⁴ Indeed, Shirley Jordan qualifies Nothomb’s autobiographical texts as ‘autobiographical fantasy’.⁹⁵

The excesses associated with monstrosity are found in Nothomb in her relation to food and to writing, and in her prolificacy. Her astonishing productivity and production have been analysed from the perspective of the personal (with autobiography), but also, as I show next, in terms of manipulation, re-production, and translation of texts. Nothomb manipulates images (of herself and the reader’s perception of her; and of her characters), and reveals a particular attachment to the visual. Moreover, her taste for shaping (writing) bodies (and their images) is also observed in the *re-creation* of ancient (his)stories and the prominence of myths and fairy tales which are regularly “ressucitated”, to borrow Yolande Helm’s words, in Nothomb’s writing.⁹⁶ As I discuss later in this introduction, the author’s interest for extraordinary corporeality, for myths and fairytales mirrors the abundance of monstrous shapes in her stories. In my analysis of *Robert des noms propres*, I relate the monstrosity of the main character to extreme bodily transformation (via anorexia), and Plectrude’s metaphorical metamorphosis into a bird strongly recalls Ovidian mythological tales of hybridisation between human subjects, animals and plants. Furthermore, the multifarious expressions

⁹² Jordan lists some of Nothomb’s appearances in her own texts; see ‘Becoming Women: Amélie Nothomb’s Studies in Constraint’, in *Contemporary French Women’s Writing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 255-86 (pp. 275-76).

⁹³ Jordan explores paratextual clues to the presence of the author; see: ‘Becoming Women: Amélie Nothomb’s Studies in Constraint’, in *Contemporary French Women’s Writing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 255-86, (pp. 275-76; and Note 57 p. 285).

⁹⁴ The autobiographical nature of Nothomb’s writing is a recurring site of investigation amongst Nothomb specialists. See for instance:

David; Hélène Jaccopard, ‘Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Nothomb’, in *Les Nouvelles Autobiographies/New Autobiographies*, ed. by M. Laouyen (= special issue of *L’Esprit créateur*, 42.4 (2002)), 45–57 (p. 45); Marie-Christine Lambert-Perreault, ‘Le soleil noir d’Amélie Nothomb: lecture psychanalytique de *Biographie de la faim*’, *Post-Scriptum.ORG*, 14 (2011), 1-9; Mark D. Lee, *Les Identités d’Amélie Nothomb: de l’invention médiatique aux fantasmes originaires* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010); Margaret Topping, ‘Orientalism and Fairytale in Amélie Nothomb’s Autofictions’, in *Redefining the Real: The Fantastic in Contemporary French and Francophone Women’s Writing*, ed. by Margaret-Anne Hutton (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 81-98.

⁹⁵ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women’s Writing*, p. 255.

⁹⁶ Yolande Helm writes: ‘Ses textes en général révèlent une fascination pour les mythes, l’antiquité grecque et latine et les ressuscitent par le biais d’une plume trempée au vitriol.’ ‘Amélie Nothomb: Une écriture alimentée à la source de l’orphisme’, *Religiologiques*, 15 (1997), 1-14 (p. 12).

of rebirth found throughout her texts go hand in hand with a certain attachment to transferring languages and conveying cultures,⁹⁷ and she has been described as ‘passeuse de langues’.⁹⁸ These expressions could also be interpreted as various responses to the prevailing notion of loss and the exploration of childhood in her texts. As well as loss, childhood has been read, for instance, alongside notions of disembodied aesthetics,⁹⁹ melancholia and mourning, and even death.¹⁰⁰ In the Nothombian world, childhood seems inextricably bound with its end. Mark D. Lee goes as far as positing ‘The evocation of childhood and its loss [...] as] perhaps the very *moteur* of her creative writing project’.¹⁰¹

So far I have introduced and critically reviewed the multifarious connections that have been established between Nothomb and several themes in her writing, and monstrosity. The author has herself been called a monster, but I would argue that this certain “intimacy” between the author and monstrosity goes beyond her excesses, her oddity or omnipresence. It appears more directly in the multiple intersections between monstrosity and other key themes in her oeuvre. These monstrous figures testify to Nothomb’s interest in extraordinary corporealities and they may reference myths or fairytales, but as I will demonstrate next, they always suggest a questioning of human identity and relationships with others. Indeed her own definition of the term presents the monster as both a trait of human identity and as that which must be tamed to allow for one’s social existence. In the second part of the literature review, I focus on

⁹⁷ Critics have explored the many facets of translation in Nothomb’s oeuvre, as a theme or rhetorical device (see for instance: Peter Cowley, ‘Translation and Translators in Amélie Nothomb’s Autobiographical Fiction’, in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 48 (2011), 271-81), or from a perspective of filmic adaptation (see for instance: Martine Guyot-Bender, ‘Coding Japan: Amélie Nothomb’s and Alain Corneau’s *Stupeur et tremblements*’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 9 (2005), 369-78.)

⁹⁸ The authors also write: ‘Nothomb est disposée immanquablement au renouveau, à se construire, à se dire multiple, [...] tout en dévoilant un Ailleurs dé/re-mythifié.’ Marie-Ange Bugnot and Carmen Cortés Zaborras, ‘Le monde selon Janus, l’“Ailleurs” chez Amélie Nothomb’, *Dalhousie French Studies*, 86 (2009), 95-104 (p. 95).

⁹⁹ See for instance: Anna Kemp, ‘The Child as Artist in Amélie Nothomb’s *Robert des noms propres*’, *French Studies*, 66 (2012), 54-67. I will return to specific readings of *Robert des noms propres* in the second part of my literature review.

¹⁰⁰ See for instance: Lambert-Perreault; Corina da Rocha Soares, ‘Corps féminins dans l’oeuvre d’Amélie Nothomb: Stéréotypes, misogynie et puberté’, *Intercâmbio*, 2 (2009), 284-300 (p. 285).

The loss of her childhood land, Japan, is also intertwined with that of childhood; see for instance the documentary: *Amélie Nothomb, une vie entre deux eaux*, dir. by Laureline Amanieux and Luca Chiari (for France 5, 2012).

¹⁰¹ Mark D. Lee, ‘Amélie Nothomb: Writing Childhood’s End’, in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder (Amsterdam and New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 142-53 (p. 142).

monstrosity and how it has been approached by critics of Nothomb's work, before moving on to readings of *Robert des noms propres*.

2.1.4 Literature review: monstrosity and Robert des noms propres

The strong presence of monstrous characters in Nothomb's oeuvre has been one of the influential factors in the commencement of this study: both my actual research on the topic and the present thesis began with Nothombian monsters. However, my focus in this chapter is not on one of the "known" Nothombian monsters as the main character in *Robert des noms propres* has never been explored from this angle. Before I continue with my own argument, it is nonetheless necessary to review how monstrosity has featured in other novels by Nothomb, and how it has been approached by critics of her oeuvre. Jean-Marc Terrasse remarks on their omnipresence in Nothomb's texts, but also on their role as subject matter and engine to her stories.¹⁰² As I show next, monsters also work as devices to explore specific contemporary issues or aspects in Nothomb's texts. For Lisa F. Signori for instance, monstrosity provides a lens to explore some aspects of intratextuality (especially the instance of narrative reflexivity) in *Mercure*. According to the author, in the novel, nurse Françoise becomes a mirror image of Omer Loncours: she transforms into a monster as she murders Loncours to take his place, house and possessions.¹⁰³ But perhaps more prominently, the monster is a literary device employed by the author to experiment with new visions and new writings of the contemporary body. Reading her novels, it is clear moreover that Nothomb delights in the composition of detailed portrayals of characters whose monstrosity is evoked via their extraordinary corporeality.¹⁰⁴ Obese characters are the archetypal Nothombian monsters of excess (excessive body fat, skin, appetite) with uncontained bodies,¹⁰⁵ like Bernadette Bernardin in *Les Catilinaires*.¹⁰⁶ My analysis of physical monstrosity in this

¹⁰² Terrasse, 'Does Monstrosity Exist in the Feminine?', p. 85.

¹⁰³ Lisa F. Signori, 'Mirrors in the Text: Amélie Nothomb's *Mercure*', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 37 (2013), 74-91.

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Rodgers writes about Nothomb: 'Realistic novelists often, of course, introduce characters with a physical description, but in Nothomb's case the impact of physical appearance goes beyond this literary convention, and indeed verges on the obsessive.' Catherine Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, pp. 50-63 (p. 50).

¹⁰⁵ See for instance Epiphane Otos in *Attentat*: he is monstrous because of his ugliness and his obesity, but also due to his abject uncontained body. See: Catherine Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties' (p. 52).

¹⁰⁶ Lénaïk Le Garrec, 'Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts', in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, pp. 64-70.

chapter tackles on the opposite the case of extreme slenderness; amongst the many explorations of Plectrude's anorexia (to which I return later), none read it through the lens of the monstrous.¹⁰⁷ In my study the dialogue between monstrosity and anorexia therefore sheds a new light on the understanding of each theme, and in turn offers a novel way of reading Nothomb's own exploration of the contemporary body in *Robert des noms propres*. The major question of beauty and ugliness also belongs to Nothomb's investigation of the body in writing, and it is often explored alongside monstrosity. For Corina da Rocha Soares, in Nothomb's writing female beauty is not incompatible with monstrosity: 'les personnages féminins peuvent être des monstres, même s'ils sont porteurs d'une grande beauté, agissant comme des torsionnaires'. She cites for instance Elena (*Le Sabotage amoureux*), Nina (*Hygiène de l'assassin*) and Fukubi Mori (*Stupeur et tremblements*). On the other hand, 'Les hommes, par contre, sont laids et monstrueux'. Some examples of ugly monsters given by the author are Prétextat Tach (*Hygiène de l'assassin*), Epiphane Otos (*Attentat*) and Palamède Bernardin (*Les Catilinaires*).¹⁰⁸ Besides the beauty/ugliness dichotomy, the monstrous has been utilised to explore other dualisms.¹⁰⁹ It has itself been read by Jean-Marc Terrasse in opposition to the angel, but the interrogation within the title of his article ('Does Monstrosity Exist in the Feminine?') also posits the monstrous as his devised method for the interrogation of issues of gender and dualism.¹¹⁰ Overall, monstrosity is utilised as a medium to investigate the themes of the (visual) body and questions of bodily and gender identity in today's society. Monstrosity is therefore expressed via the body of the subject, but also via his-her choices and actions. Terrasse's Derridean approach to the monster underlines its (interdependent) unicity and unpredictability,¹¹¹ a feature that is also observed in the numerous murderers in Nothomb's texts.¹¹²

Readings of *Robert des noms propres* have revolved around the theme of the body but not, as I propose in this chapter, via the lens of the monstrous. This novel forms part of Nothomb's investigation of the body, and offers the author's own way to denounce how

¹⁰⁷ The lack of focus on monstrosity and anorexia could be explained by the fact that slenderness is socially less repellant than heaviness.

¹⁰⁸ Soares, 'Corps féminins dans l'oeuvre d'Amélie Nothomb' (p. 289).

¹⁰⁹ On monstrosity as a concept belonging to a dualistic pair, see for instance: *The Beautiful and the Monstrous*.

¹¹⁰ See: Terrasse, 'Does monstrosity exist in the feminine?'

¹¹¹ Terrasse proposes the notion of 'monstre événementiel'. See: Terrasse, 'Does monstrosity exist in the feminine?', pp. 85-86.

¹¹² In *Mercur*, monstrous Françoise is a 'meurtrière machiavelique'. See: Laureline Amanieux, 'Amélie Nothomb: Des romans à double fond', *La Revue Générale*, 6 (2002), 55-60 (p. 56).

today the body has become the object of increasing control.¹¹³ In ‘The Child as Artist in Amélie Nothomb’s *Robert des noms propres*’, Anna Kemp reads Plectrude’s self-implemented body discipline as ‘[the] promise [of] an escape from the unpredictable play of desiring gazes, and a return to the safely constructed space of childhood’.¹¹⁴ From this perspective, this novel shares the kind of childhood nostalgia that also appears under various forms in *Hygiène de l’assassin*, *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Biographie de la faim* for instance. Kemp similarly argues in another article that in *Robert des noms propres*, the loss of childhood and perfection is recreated in the character’s dedication to aestheticism. She writes that Plectrude ‘submit[s] herself to the rigorous artistry of ballet’ in order to ‘become a weightless ideal of form’ and ‘maintain the aesthetic ideal of childhood’.¹¹⁵ Overall in Kemp’s view of *Robert des noms propres*, the idealisation of childhood is synonymous with the disembodied aesthetics that runs through the novel. In this chapter, I will propose an altogether different interpretation of the relation between the subject’s weightlessness and notions of body control. If Plectrude’s weight loss is initially caused by the demanding physical demands/control of ballet, her gradual descent into the torments of anorexia surely puts into question her ability to control her transformation into a ‘weightless ideal of form’. On the contrary I show that anorexia represents the illusion of control: for the diseased individual, the supreme control over the body entails an (always impossible) separation between body and mind. In a nutshell, the lack of control of the anorexic over her body is represented in the (metaphorical) transformation into a monster who “takes over” control of her whole broken self.

Another facet to Kemp’s argument is the conflict between childhood and adolescence, which she interprets as a conflict between art and life. She explains that, ‘Plectrude does everything she can to fight off the signs of adulthood, and her weapon of choice is art, or, more specifically, the unforgiving discipline of ballet’.¹¹⁶ Conflict has been posited as a driving force in Nothomb’s texts, and Frédérique Chevillot identifies it as a theme, a metaphor, or as subject matter in the personal stories of the author’s childhood.¹¹⁷ The reticence to leave behind the golden period of childhood is

¹¹³ On the issue of bodily control, see for instance: Rodgers, ‘Nothomb’s Anorexic Beauties’.

¹¹⁴ Anna Kemp, ‘The Child as Artist’, p. 61.

¹¹⁵ Anna Kemp, ‘Amélie the Aesthete: Art and Politics in the World of Amélie Nothomb’, in *Women’s Writing in Twenty-First-Century France*, ed. by Damlé and Rye, pp. 237-50 (pp. 242-43).

¹¹⁶ Kemp, ‘The Child as Artist’, p. 61.

¹¹⁷ Frédérique Chevillot, ‘Amélie Nothomb: Faire quelque chose de la guerre’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 11 (2007), 99-109.

paired with the tensions surrounding (entering) adolescence, and in Nothomb's novels, they are conveyed through varying forms of conflict. Her texts have themselves been qualified as 'adolescent' because of the themes they explore and the question of the (adolescent) body, but also because of the presence of extreme adolescent reactions.¹¹⁸ In my view, if Plectrude's conflictual relationship with her body could be said to evoke the known difficulties of her age (a transitional stage in life), I would furthermore argue that they are all the more enhanced within the dance school whose requirements, as I will argue in the second part of this chapter, go against the natural developments of the adolescent body. Conflict, the common denominator to Nothomb's texts according to Margaret-Anne Hutton, is either 'individuel' (conflict between characters), 'collectif' (wars), or '[une] lutte entre l'auteur et le lecteur'.¹¹⁹ In *Robert des noms propres*, the imposition of unattainable corporeal standards which aim to control the subject via her body create a conflict between the institution and the individual; this conflict, I would continue, is in turn recuperated "within" the subject who then becomes conflicted (torn) between the demands of her school and those of her body. I will show that this form of "internal" or personal conflict is probably one of the most destructive because the subject (the Foucauldian self-disciplined docile body) becomes her own worst enemy. Amongst the two types of 'conflit individuel' explored by Hutton, Plectrude's conflict would resemble most the 'conflit intra-psychique' of a disturbed subject. In Hutton's article however, it involves a process of projection – the creation of a monster – which allows the expulsion of the enemy within, 'extériorisant ainsi un conflit intérieur'.¹²⁰ In the case of Plectrude, we do not witness the creation of a separate monster, and Plectrude herself metaphorically undergoes metamorphosis into a monstrous shape that "is" still her. Overall, and on a larger scale, the multiple possible readings of this conflict could refer to our 'contemporary society as grounded in the psychology of

However, despite noting the omnipresence of war in our contemporary society, Chevillot underlines the discontinuity with Nothomb as the daughter of a diplomat (pp. 99-101).

¹¹⁸ Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 279.

¹¹⁹ Margaret-Anne Hutton, "'Personne n'est indispensable, sauf l'ennemi": l'oeuvre conflictuelle d'Amélie Nothomb', in *Nouvelles écrivaines*, ed. by Morello and Rodgers, pp. 253-68 (pp. 253-54).

Conflict is also *mis en scène* in Nothomb's *Acide Sulfurique*, a novel which juggles with issues of 'hyper-médiatisation' and its excesses, and those of fictionalised (televised) conflict. See for instance: Yves-Antoine Clemmen, 'Où a quand même lieu la littérature française: Situer Nothomb à la rentrée littéraire 2005', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 11 (2007), 481-88.

¹²⁰ Hutton, "'Personne n'est indispensable, sauf l'ennemi'", pp. 264-65.

modern warfare'.¹²¹ Moreover, I posit that it speaks of the pressure felt by subjects to meet the corporeal standards of the various social institutions that form our contemporary society.

Finally, while I contend that conflict is mediated via monstrosity and contained (up to a certain point) within/by the institution, in Kemp's analysis, the dance school represents the possibility of a retreat to 'an artificial paradise over which the artist reigns supreme'. In line with her exploration of expressions of Nothomb's 'decadent aesthetic' in the novel, the discipline of ballet and the school are to be interpreted as voluntarily self-imposed by the subject who seeks to maintain the ideal disembodied aesthetic experience of childhood.¹²²

Other readings of *Robert des noms propres* include Valérie Dusaillant-Fernandes's article, which is an exploration of the translation of violence from painful physical transformation into language. She presents the recurrent themes of violence and suffering as tools used by Nothomb to 'transgresser les tabous' and 'stigmatiser les exclusions de toutes sortes'.¹²³ In my exploration of the novel, the violence is situated in the body of the protagonist, and especially via the violent, painful transformation into a monstrous shape. Several other critics of *Robert des noms propres* have focused on the predominant theme of anorexia. These readings will be reviewed in Part Three which is dedicated to anorexia in this chapter, after I have laid out the fundamental principles of the disciplinary institution.

2.1.5 Exploring visible difference: from 'entre-deux' to monstrosity

As I have noted above, the recurring theme of childhood has often been approached by Nothomb from the perspective of (the anticipation of) its loss, projecting oneself into, whilst simultaneously resisting, its inevitable end. A companion theme to childhood in Nothomb's texts is the fairy tale, and just as much as its recurring presence can signify a desire to resuscitate lost tales, the world of the fairy tale permits a re-immersion into the universe of childhood. The fairytale is constructed on a series of oppositional pairs such as: 'Beautiful and ugly, good and bad, success and failure, [...] reward and punishment

¹²¹ Claire Gorrara, 'Speaking volumes: Amélie Nothomb's *Hygiène de l'assassin*', in *Histoire/Histoires: In Honour of Claire Duchon*, ed. by Christine Zmroczek and Barbara Einhorn (= *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23 (2000)), 761-66 (p. 764).

¹²² Kemp, 'Amélie the Aesthete', p. 238.

¹²³ Valérie Dusaillant-Fernandes, 'Écriture du corps: violence et souffrance dans *Robert des noms propres* d'Amélie Nothomb', *Voix plurielles*, 1, No 2 (2005) (pp. 2-3).

[...], appearance and reality, [...] magnificent and dirty, [...] real and unreal'.¹²⁴

However, as I will show next and via my exploration of monstrosity, the interdependency between dualism and the fairy tale quality that has been observed in Nothomb's oeuvre is also contingent on its dialogue with a move beyond the binary. Throughout her writing, Nothomb plays with oppositional categories and reorganises these antithetic pairs via multiple narrative choices and corporeal representations. The theme of the fairy tale has been explored in conjunction with a re-evaluation of binary oppositions; in her article entitled 'Orientalism and fairytale in Amélie Nothomb's autofictions', Margaret Topping warns the reader against a quick interpretation of Nothomb's texts, overlooking the intricacies of such uncommon reunions. Her study focuses primarily on Nothomb's take on Orientalist dynamics between East and West, analysed through the lens of the fantastic as expressed in fairytale, in Nothomb's autofictional productions (mainly *Stupeur et tremblements*). It aims towards a post-Orientalist take on the text, mainly through the device of the fairytale which, as Topping argues, proposes/demands a rethinking of established binary East/West oppositions.¹²⁵ Topping relies in her article on the concept of 'entre-deux', previously utilised by Philippa Caine to rethink the known opposition between the real and the fantastic. Indeed, Caine's reading of Nothomb's portrayals of female corporeality against a backdrop of real/fantastic in-betweenness opens for a new *regard* on the female body, inscribed in an 'entre-deux' space.¹²⁶

In this chapter, I similarly explore Nothombian portrayals of the body which could be read utilising Caine's concept of the 'entre-deux'. As I have explained, in *Robert des noms propres* the dance school and its corporeal rules create a series of conflicts which leave the subject divided between the necessity/desire to follow the rules of her school and her ability to maintain the required corporeal standards. A response to (and arguably a move beyond) this 'entre-deux' circumstance may be situated in the anorexia of the young dancer; in my analysis, I see two facets to this response. I will first argue that anorexia can be interpreted as an expression of submission and resistance, and also investigate whether (forms of) salvation can be envisaged. However, the anorexic response is always unsustainable and excludes the

¹²⁴ Max Lüthi, *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, trans. J. Erikson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 95.

¹²⁵ Topping, 'Orientalism and fairytale', p. 83.

¹²⁶ Philippa Caine, "'Entre-deux" Inscriptions of Female Corporeality in the Writing of Amélie Nothomb', in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, pp. 71-84 (p. 74).

permanence of a state of ‘entre-deux’. The monstrous appears at this juncture. The illness takes over Plectrude’s ability to look after her health, and whilst on the verge of death, a call for the reevaluation of the dualisms within the dance school and with Plectrude is mediated via the figure of the monstrous.

Monstrosity has often been understood as a concept belonging to a dualistic pair, and read, as I have established in my literature review, in opposition with other more “positive” terms such as the good, the beautiful or the angel. In Nothomb’s texts, monsters never feature on their own, firstly because they need to be created (imagined) by other characters, and also because they also have to be rejected as antithetical representations of their “normal” surrounding companions. However, what would it mean to rethink the concept of the monstrous (in Nothomb’s texts), not as an oppositional category, but as an all-encompassing embodiment of subversion and deviance? I propose a reading of the monstrous as a figure which, even if it often originates in Nothombian fantastic contexts, is also to be found outside the sphere of the fairy tale altogether. Many monsters drive and populate Nothomb’s stories but I contend that they have not yet all been found. Far from launching into a (literary) witch-hunt, my study focuses on the monstrous as the embodiment of a difference that resists (total) understanding and rejection,¹²⁷ as a figure of recognition and self-projection but also one used to secure one’s “normality” and separation from discordance made flesh. Therefore, if the monstrous may be broadly defined as that which projects – on the body, and to others – an underlying (maybe threatening) deviance, I postulate that these incarnations, which relate to and go beyond the ‘entre-deux’, also enable a new *regard* on (visible) difference.

2.1.6 Monstrosity and adolescent transformations

The traditional approach to monstrosity (safely) situates the term within the confines of human knowledge and control, for instance by associating it with what has been judged as outside the law or the norm. It is indeed common to speak (for instance in Nothomb’s stories) of monstrous criminals, or monstrous excessive bodies. As I have noted above, the monstrous can also feature in opposition to “positive” notions like the beautiful or the angel. The face is generally the focal point for beauty in Nothomb’s texts, whilst

¹²⁷ This resistance is perpetuated by both the (monstrous) subject and his/her surroundings. Whilst this first chapter focuses mainly on the (excluding) response from outside (the disciplinary structure), my next chapter focuses on self-rejection on the part of the monstrous subject.

ugliness is to be found on the entire body.¹²⁸ But contrary to beauty or ugliness, I would advance that monstrosity cannot be (permanently) situated or opposed – and therefore contained – on/to the body or elsewhere. Nothomb's 'fascination with culturally constructed conceptions of the beautiful and the monstrous'¹²⁹ calls for a dismantling of the opposing (binary) structure and a re-evaluation of the understanding of its concepts. Indeed, I present the monstrous as a challenge to (rather than an annihilation of) the rules; it is not outside the realm of the human/social but instead sits at its limits and weakens (questions) them. Therefore, I ask, what happens when the monstrous is relieved from its (safe, convenient) antithetical function, when it is envisaged as an entity whose unpredictability¹³⁰ threatens the rules which have rejected (and created) it?

2.1.7 Transitional periods and control over the body and the subject

I have identified and focused so far on two driving forces to Nothomb's literary investigation: (the fear of) childhood's end and monstrosity. Their *mise en dialogue* sheds light on an ensuing motif of investigation, that is, the multiple (and traumatic) metamorphoses of adolescence. During interviews, Nothomb has spoken of 'L'adolescence vécue comme une monstruosité physique'.¹³¹ From personal confession to written stories, critics have also identified in her texts 'the adolescent fear of the metamorphosing female body', and 'the transition from girl to woman as a traumatic experience of loss'.¹³² The subject's powerlessness in front of the transformations during this transitional period supplements the feeling of loss that is felt in the gradual disappearance of childhood attributes and their replacement by new (unwelcome?) physical features. The 'adolescent moment' is indeed 'the key Nothombian turning point',¹³³ it is a hinge period between ages, at the juncture between corporeal identities.

A fissure in the integrity of the self, transitional periods in life reveal via uncontrollable corporeal changes the fragility of the subject's boundaries.¹³⁴ Yet it is

¹²⁸ See: Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 51; Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 262.

¹²⁹ Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 257.

¹³⁰ See: Terrasse, 'Does monstrosity exist in the feminine?'

¹³¹ Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder, 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, pp. 177-208 (p. 188).

¹³² Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 257.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Julia Kristeva's analysis of adolescence as an open psychic structure simultaneously brings forth notions of unpredictability, vulnerability, the impossibility to control the changing body and the fear it can therefore arouse. See: Julia Kristeva, *Les Nouvelles maladies de l'âme* (Paris:

especially when the individual is in the process of changing – open to the outside and therefore unpredictable – that a greater control over the subject (and the body, and via the body) has to be implemented if he/she is to remain a member of a societal structure. Whilst critics have read Nothomb's texts and denounced how in our contemporary society bodies have become the object of increasing control,¹³⁵ my study aims to reveal and explore the many faces of institutional hold on the changing body – the body that is growing up or old, the visually altered body because of illness, and the rejected body of an unsuccessful reproduction – in order to unveil how these processes of control often result in social rejection and self-rejection of subjects deemed inappropriate within their social contexts.

The Latin origin of the term adolescence – *adolescere* – means to grow up and entails developments. However, Plectrude's body is brought to a halt as she leaves childhood, frozen in its blooming process. Plectrude develops anorexia: the illness not only interrupts the natural (hormonal) changes of adolescence but also takes her back to a more childish (underdeveloped and perishing) body. Critics have observed in Nothomb's texts the harmful and poisoning nature of adolescence,¹³⁶ and its portrayal as 'le premier trépas de l'être humain'.¹³⁷ I contend that the symbolic nature of this first (unrealised) 'trépas' entails a later rebirth of the subject who has gone through adolescence, and I explore later in the chapter a possible new embodiment for the character of the novel. Indeed if 'In Nothomb's case [...], the end of childhood and the end of the world seem to amount to the same thing',¹³⁸ the apocalyptic nature of this transitional period would therefore require the (re)construction of another world: in *Robert des noms propres*, the dance school quickly becomes Plectrude's universe. As I will show in the next parts of this chapter, the establishment's imposition of (corporeal) rules on an individual between developmental stages is a disruption of the lifecycle, for which I contend the monstrous permits an embodiment, a denunciation and call for re-evaluation.

2.2 The Opera School of dance as Foucauldian disciplinary institution

Fayard, 1999), pp. 203-28. Similarly Corina da Rocha Soares identifies in Nothomb's representation of adolescence '[les] thèmes tels que la peur, l'angoisse du néant et du vide.' See: Soares, 'Corps féminins dans l'oeuvre d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 285.

¹³⁵ See for instance: Dusillant-Fernandes, 'Ecriture du corps'; Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties'.

¹³⁶ Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 263.

¹³⁷ Soares, 'Corps féminins dans l'oeuvre d'Amélie Nothomb', 285.

¹³⁸ Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 261.

2.2.1 'Les corps dociles': controlling space to discipline the body

This section develops a reading of the Paris Opera School of Dance in *Robert des noms propres* as a disciplinary institution, via Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*. I begin with a fundamental analysis of 'discipline' and a presentation of its different constituent parts (in line with Foucault's own methodological approach in his seminal text) in order to explore through close textual analysis the functioning of the (fictive) disciplinary institution in Nothomb's novel. According to Foucault, there are three cornerstones to the establishment of 'discipline': 'Les corps dociles', 'Les moyens du bon dressement' and 'Le panoptisme'.¹³⁹ I shall therefore begin with the crafting of docile bodies, which in turn rests on four precepts, namely: 'L'art des répartitions', 'Le contrôle de l'activité', 'L'organisation des genèses' and 'La composition des forces'.¹⁴⁰ *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* is, above all, as the subtitle indicates, an examination of the evolutions in the penal system. The following exploration of the functioning of the Opera School will surely remind the reader of a penal colony or labour camp.¹⁴¹ 'L'art des répartitions' is the control of space via its distribution in four steps. 'La discipline procède d'abord à la répartition des individus dans l'espace. Pour cela, elle met en oeuvre plusieurs techniques'. Foucault cites first 'la clôture' as 'la spécification d'un lieu hétérogène à tous les autres et fermé sur lui-même'.¹⁴² Spatial confinement is operated between society and the designated location of the institution (as two distinct non-linked spaces); it is the first means employed for the control of the dancers/inmates. If the letter of acceptance to the prestigious school came almost as a divine blessing (113), Plectrude's first day is actually closer to hell than to heaven: 'Elle attendait la rentrée comme une libération. Ce fut une incarcération' (117). There is a clear division between the inside 'en ces murs' (121) and the outside 'en dehors du pensionnat', 'dans le monde extérieur' (118). After the incarceration of the young girls follows the loss of their status as beloved children: 'A toutes ces fillettes, ce premier jour à l'école des rats donna l'impression d'une éviction brutale de l'enfance' (119). At the outset of Plectrude's story at the Opera

¹³⁹ Respectively: Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 159-99; pp. 200-27; pp. 228-64.

¹⁴⁰ For the purpose of my argument I shall focus on 'L'art des répartitions' and 'Le contrôle de l'activité' as founding principles in the making of docile bodies.

¹⁴¹ Foucault observes that certain models of disciplinary institutions have adopted earlier than others the various constituent processes of their 'anatomie politique'. Amongst these he lists 'les collèges' and soon after '[les] lycées'. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 162-63.

¹⁴² Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 166.

School, Nothomb's comparison between the young recruits and plants ('la veille, leurs corps étaient encore des plantes aimées') is a striking visualisation of the extraction from the family space ('arrach[ement] à ce terreau humide' for 'un monde sec'). Nothomb's subsequent topiary techniques (overseen by 'un oeil âpre de spécialiste extrême-oriental') announce the forthcoming (painful) cutting and shaping of the creations,¹⁴³ 'de gré ou de force, car, depuis le temps, on avait des techniques pour cela' (119-120).

The isolation of the subject is further installed with the allocation of a delimited space in the institution according to Foucault's 'principe de la localisation élémentaire ou du *quadrillage*. A chaque individu, sa place; et en chaque emplacement, un individu'.¹⁴⁴ Foucault explains the necessity of avoiding the indistinct and therefore uncontrollable gathering of individuals, as a 'tactique d'antidésertion, d'antivagabondage, d'antiagglomération'. Following the initial enclosure of individuals (and beyond the need to prevent an escape) the aim is to gather for observation: 'Il s'agit [...] de pouvoir à chaque instant surveiller la conduite de chacun, l'apprécier, la sanctionner, mesurer les qualités ou les mérites'.¹⁴⁵ During the first day at the Opera School the children are separated into three weight categories, and we read: 'Les grosses vaches, soit vous maigrissez, soit vous partez: il n'y a *pas de place* ici pour les truies'¹⁴⁶ (118, my emphasis).

Indeed, the control of space is paired with a positing of subjects in space according to corporeal criteria. Depending on the individual instance of the disciplinary institution, delimited sections of space within its walls serve unique functions. These sub-divisions of the overall space of the institution enable the discipline to infiltrate the various strata of the institution, branching out to each divided functional space, reaching the individuals within these spaces. This is 'La règle des *emplacements fonctionnels*': it

¹⁴³ In her analysis of this metaphor, Dusaillant-Fernandes writes about bonsai trees, their daily cuts and care to retain their miniature shapes, and notes that 'L'aboutissement est beau mais artificiel tout comme les danseuses qui s'exécutent lors d'un spectacle.' She also identifies the semantic field of pain, torture and slavery of a hellish place: 'Cette violence des mots consiste à relayer la souffrance corporelle des jeunes adolescentes.' See: Dusaillant-Fernandes, 'Écriture du corps', pp. 6-7.

¹⁴⁴ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 168.

¹⁴⁵ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 167-68.

¹⁴⁶ Foucault notes: 'La répartition selon les rangs ou les grades a un double rôle: marquer les écarts, hiérarchiser les qualités, les compétences et les aptitudes; mais aussi châtier et récompenser.' He lists several ranks, those of 'des très bons', 'des bons', '[des] médiocres', '[des] mauvais' and even 'la classe "honteuse"' to which, I would argue, the 'truies' mentioned above could be said to belong. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 213-14.

grants the means of surveillance to a delimited space.¹⁴⁷ *Robert* provides several instances of these spaces: there is ‘une salle plus grande que d’habitude’ (124) where dancers are convened for exceptional announcements by their teachers. Within the practice room, the simple separation between ‘la barre’ and ‘[le] centre de la salle’ is comparable to the difference between strenuous exercises and ‘tant de plaisir’ (126).

The last step in the laying out of space is ‘le rang’, broadly defined as ‘la place qu’on occupe dans un classement’.¹⁴⁸ During the first examination, Plectrude’s weight puts her amongst ‘[les] normales’ (118); concerning her dance skills, we read later in the novel: ‘Elle était en train de devenir l’une des meilleures élèves’ (144). The addition of the ranking element further stresses the permanent observation and appraisal of the individual according to the precise criterion of the institution.

2.2.2 *Disciplining the body via its controlled functions*

The destitution of personal space and the uprooting of subjects from their previous social circle/environment represent the necessary conditions for the enforcement of the four steps abovementioned that divide and control space. Similarly with ‘Le contrôle de l’activité’ it is necessary to symbolically extract subjects from their (sense of) time to allow the construction of a new system. ‘Le contrôle de l’activité’ allows the institution to operate a temporal means of discipline. First of all the age-old ‘*emploi du temps*’ – ‘un vieil héritage’ according to Foucault – is composed of ‘trois grands procédés – établir des scansion, contraindre à des occupations déterminées, régler les cycles de répétition’. The timetable puts rhythm into the daily life of the docile bodies within the disciplinary institution, and supplies compulsory tasks that regulate everyday life. Foucault moreover notes the atemporal dimension given to the establishments ruled by such timetables: their strictness and regularity permits the continuation of old systems of habits and regulations, and allows their smooth/easy association with similarly regulated newer institutions.¹⁴⁹ For the young girls who have just joined the Opera School, the gulf between their former and present existences under the ‘discipline de fer’ (121) is emphasised by the impression of having moved backwards in time: ‘Les petites venaient d’effectuer un voyage instantané dans les siècles et dans l’espace: elles étaient passées en quelques secondes de la fin du IIe millénaire en France à la Chine

¹⁴⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 168.

¹⁴⁸ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 171.

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 175.

médiévale' (120). This initial feeling will be corroborated by the medieval practices of torture in the institution, with the sole difference that these practices gradually become voluntarily perpetuated by the victims.

Within the institution, '*L'élaboration temporelle de l'acte*'¹⁵⁰ circumscribes the extent and the duration of each timetabled activity; '*la mise en corrélation du corps et du geste*' instigates 'le bon emploi du corps, qui permet un bon emploi du temps' where 'rien ne doit rester oisif ou inutile'.¹⁵¹ At the Opera School the dancers are constantly controlled as they are incessantly exercising their muscles or their minds. As we read in the novel,

L'entraînement commençait tôt le matin et se terminait tard le soir, avec d'insignifiantes interruptions pour un repas qui ne méritait pas ce nom et pour une plage d'études pendant laquelle les élèves savouraient si profondément le repos du corps qu'elles en oubliaient l'effort intellectuel requis. (121)

The extreme physical effort that is required of the young dancers is not achievable given the context of physical exhaustion and food privations. Similarly these pupils do not make the most out of their 'plage d'études' simply because of deep fatigue.¹⁵² Nonetheless the dedication of a portion of their time for study and the design of a strict timetable as a whole come as a tool to implement discipline, to shape their bodies, and their minds.

2.2.3 From control to manipulation and 'assujettissement'

To explore the process of manipulation of the subject, I shall return to Foucault's initial definition of docile bodies: 'Est docile un corps qui peut être soumis, qui peut être utilisé, qui peut être transformé et perfectionné'.¹⁵³ The disciplinary institution "tames" its members via a complex supervision of the relationship between bodies, space and function, thanks to the laying out of the space and the close monitoring of activity. Thus 'dans toute société, le corps est pris à l'intérieur de pouvoirs très serrés, qui lui imposent des contraintes, des interdits ou des obligations.' According to Foucault, 'les

¹⁵⁰ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 177.

¹⁵¹ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 178. Foucault lists another two steps in 'Le contrôle de l'activité': '*L'articulation corps-objet*' (p. 179) and '*L'utilisation exhaustive*' (p. 180) which for the purpose and necessity of my argument I shall not explore.

¹⁵² See: Dusallant-Fernandes, 'Écriture du corps'.

¹⁵³ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 160.

“disciplines”” operate with methods of ‘L’échelle [...] L’objet [...] and] La modalité [du contrôle]’ whereby with the scale of control most importantly,

il ne s’agit pas de traiter le corps ... comme s’il était une unité indissociable, mais de le travailler dans le détail; d’exercer sur lui une coercition ténue, d’assurer des prises au niveau même de la mécanique – mouvements, gestes, attitudes, rapidité: pouvoir infinitésimal sur le corps actif.¹⁵⁴

The control of the body of the dancer entails the regulation of food intake:

Les professeurs avaient tant diabolisé la nourriture qu’elle en paraissait alléchante, si médiocre fût-elle. Les enfants l’appréhendaient avec terreur, dégoûtées du désir qu’elle suscitait. Une bouchée avalée était une bouchée de trop. (122)

The aversion the teachers have managed to create is extremely powerful as it goes further than distaste for food: it is the disgust of the desire for food.¹⁵⁵ The young girls are thus insured against greediness and most importantly it is the outbreak of another set of feelings – terror, disgust – as an additional repellent that will prevent the dancers from even wanting to eat. They are subjected to physical control (confinement) and to psychological manipulation.¹⁵⁶ This exemplifies a ‘coercition ténue’, which is the imperceptible capacity to force the body to submit to the law. This obligation to “behave” properly as a dancer originates from the very attribution of the status as a dancer. The extent of institutional control over the individual exceeds the supervision of space, activity/function and even the body as it reaches to the subject’s physiology and psychology: ‘Le corps humain entre dans une machinerie de pouvoir qui le *fouille*, le *désarticule* et le *recompose*’.¹⁵⁷ From a macro (binary division to categorise individuals) to a micro (operating on the individual) level of control, the subject transformed into a docile body assimilates (the rules of) the institution, which symbolically penetrate the surface of the individual to operate on three levels: physical, physiological and psychological. Confined within the walls of the Opera School, Plectrude’s evolution from compliance to excessive endorsement of the rules of the institution leads her

¹⁵⁴ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 161.

¹⁵⁵ I return to the theme of disgust in the fifth chapter of this thesis where it is also portrayed as a powerful tool for the control of subjects.

¹⁵⁶ On the relation between food/hunger, protest and imprisonment, see: Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Virago, 1993).

¹⁵⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 162, my italics.

beyond ‘assujettissement’¹⁵⁸ and towards self-enslavement (a downfall explored by Nothomb through the motif of anorexia).

2.2.4 *‘Les moyens du bon dressement’: imposing (bodily) norms, examinations and self-discipline*

I shall now progress to the second instalment of Foucault’s theorisation of ‘discipline’ – ‘Les moyens du bon dressement’ – and turn especially to his analysis of ‘L’examen’.¹⁵⁹

In *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault introduces it as follows:

L’examen combine les techniques de la hiérarchie qui surveille et celles de la sanction qui normalise. Il est un regard normalisateur, une surveillance qui permet de qualifier, de classer et de punir. Il établit sur les individus une visibilité à travers laquelle on les différencie et on les sanctionne. C’est pourquoi, dans tous les dispositifs de discipline, l’examen est hautement ritualisé.¹⁶⁰

In *Robert*, Nothomb portrays this ritual as follows: ‘Le premier jour fut digne d’une boucherie. Une espèce de maigre et vieille charcutière vint passer en revue les élèves comme si elles avaient été des morceaux de viande’ (118). This first inspection clarifies the functioning of the School: the dancers will be constantly examined and judged. Via visual inspection by the ‘charcutière’ and the professors – their ‘regard normalisateur’ – the gaze checks whether the bodies are within the norms and it also indirectly imposes the respect of these norms. The knowledge of the existence of this norm and of the necessity to abide by it as a rule is in itself a means of enforcing discipline. Nothomb exposes/denounces (the dangers of) the principle of normalisation with a slight undertone of derision as Plectrude, known (by the reader and her family) for her slenderness, is posited as borderline “normal” according to the norms of this institution.¹⁶¹ As she joins the School Plectrude is judged as “within the norm”:

Plectrude, qui aurait treize ans un mois plus tard, mesurait un mètre cinquante-cinq et pesait quarante kilos, ce qui était peu, surtout compte tenu du fait qu’elle était tout en muscles, comme une danseuse qui se respecte; on ne lui en signifia pas moins que c’était un ‘maximum à ne pas dépasser’. (119)

¹⁵⁸ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 161.

¹⁵⁹ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 217-27. This concluding precept of ‘Les moyens du bon dressement’ subsequently leads onto Foucault’s exploration of the Panopticon.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 217.

¹⁶¹ See also Dusailant-Fernandes’s article where she records the testimony of a danseuse étoile, Elisabeth Maurin: ‘L’extrême minceur, la maigreur, sont aujourd’hui le canon exigé.’ Dusailant-Fernandes, ‘Écriture du corps’, p. 6 and Note 5 p. 12.

Beyond visual observation, the judgement of the dancers rests as well on the measurement and weighing of their bodies: ‘Ensuite, on mesure et pèse les jeunes morceaux de viande.’ (119) Anonymised, they become mere flesh to appraise.¹⁶² (It could be added that this process of anonymisation announces the forthcoming process of dehumanisation as Plectrude metaphorically transforms into a monstrous shape.) Moreover, this practice which rhythms ritual inspections is later perpetuated by the docile young girls themselves. As I will show, Plectrude’s excessive self-discipline will render her incapable of caring for her own self. Furthermore, the threat of eviction from the dance school is described as a ‘dégraissage’ (123); for Dusailant-Fernandes, it is one of several expressions of (verbal) violence causing ‘des frissons d’horreur et d’angoisse: ces termes sont utilisés en boucherie’. She continues, ‘Ce jargon de boucherie est utilisé pour renforcer l’idée qu’apprendre la danse à l’école de l’Opéra, c’est un peu comme “aller à l’abattoir”: on passe ou on casse’.¹⁶³ This ‘dégraissage’ is a shedding of unnecessary flesh and fat (bodies); it represents an expulsion from a space and status that will spawn a feeling of lost self in the case of Plectrude, later in the novel.

2.2.5 ‘*Le panoptisme*’: from submission to ‘fabrication’ of the visible subject

Finally, the last cornerstone in Foucault’s theorisation of ‘discipline’, that is ‘le panoptisme’, shares with ‘l’examen’ a dependence on visibility. The latter links the gaze with the rank, favouring a dualistic approach between the examined and the examiner, and the concept of the Panopticon combines visibility with performance.

¹⁶² Nothomb also voices her criticism of the contemporary imposition of norms of beauty in *Attentat*, through her character Epiphane Otos, who declares: ‘Le beau, qui devrait servir à faire communier les hommes dans l’admiration, sert à exclure.’ See: Amélie Nothomb, *Attentat* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997) p. 75. Ironically, he becomes a judge at ‘Miss International’, a competition which he criticises for its reliance on fixed stereotypes for female beauty. He confesses: ‘S’ils [les organisateurs de l’élection] avaient affiché sans hypocrisie leur cynisme, je n’aurais pas été choqué: quand on vend de la viande, autant ne pas cacher qu’on est boucher. Il me semble que j’ai assisté à de la prostitution déguisée en vente de charité.’ (133) The models, like the dancers in *Robert*, are there for appraisal and, it could be argued, consumption (see the shared parallel between *Robert* and *Attentat* with butchery). See also women as food for men in: Désirée Pries, ‘Piscina: Gender Identity in *Métaphysique des tubes*’, in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder, pp. 24-35 (p. 28).

¹⁶³ Dusailant-Fernandes, ‘Écriture du corps’, p. 7. I would add that the life-and-death situation implied with the ‘abattoir’ re-emerges at the end of the story as anorexic Plectrude ‘ne jouait plus avec sa santé, puisqu’elle jouait sa santé. Elle le savait.’ (143-44).

Furthermore, alongside the need for constant self-checks/control, others also become the object of surveillance. Contrary to the split approach mentioned above, the application of the principle of ‘panoptisme’ to society does not create binary dynamics but encapsulates the whole groups and establishes a relation with others based on surveillance.

I argue that in *Robert des noms propres* the story is supported by a tripod; the triple axis – place, role and body – define and “carry” the character throughout the novel: they depend on each other, and they define each other. Foucault notes that, ‘La discipline “fabrique” des individus; elle est la technique spécifique d’un pouvoir qui se donne les individus à la fois pour objets et pour instruments de son exercice’.¹⁶⁴ For this reason, (imposed) discipline originates first “outside” the individual, then later from “within” as the self-disciplined subject voluntarily complies and even establishes his/her own rules. Plectrude observes the (physical) disadvantages of eating yoghurt and decides against it. We read: ‘Si fous que fussent les adultes de l’école, aucun ne recommandait de se priver de yahourt, et même les élèves les plus décharnées en mangeaient. Plectrude bannit cet aliment’ (145-46). The body (and mind) of the individual has to be changed and adapted to conform to the image of the role; it is her body that enables Plectrude to be a dancer, and to perform her identity as a dancer.¹⁶⁵ Classical ballet and dance belong to the category of performing arts. Indeed the main character is constantly performing and it could be argued, pretending. In this respect, it could be said that Nothomb displaces Foucault’s predominant focus on physical appearance to explore more deeply the question of performance. The unnatural demands and other physical mutilations imposed upon the body are tolerated (then self-implemented) by the young girl for the sake of her art and destiny. Similarly when the body eventually refuses the hardships, Plectrude loses her status as a dancer and her destiny; it is thus the mise en scène of her body and performance that permit her to voice her place in the world.

While under constant self-checks and ritualised examinations, the (active) body is also permanently watched over by others. In dance schools the classrooms are surrounded by wide mirrors that allow the teacher and learners to monitor progress and make comparisons. Pupils are encircled by the gaze which forces them to double their efforts and do their best all the time. In *Robert*, when the students are allowed to dance

¹⁶⁴ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 200.

¹⁶⁵ Dusailant-Fernandes observes about Plectrude that: ‘Elle donne son corps aux mains des professeurs de l’école de danse de l’Opéra de Paris dans le seul but d’être danseuse étoile.’ See: Dusailant-Fernandes, ‘Écriture du corps’, p. 3.

for the first time, Plectrude enjoys her ‘récompense’ as she is about to ‘s’élancer, sous les regards des autres, au centre de la salle’ (126). Interestingly, her account does not fail to mention the presence of others; their presence and their gaze, although a driving (and defining) force in this competitive environment, nonetheless divulges (via the syntax in the sentence) the interrupting presence of their gaze, between her ‘élan’ and the ‘centre de la salle.’ Following Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon it could be argued that the system and effects are the same in the dance school. At the end of the eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham, an English social theorist and philosopher, designed a new type of prison building that allows the surveillance of many by only one guard. Foucault explains:

le principe : à la périphérie un bâtiment en anneau ; au centre, une tour ; celle-ci est percée de larges fenêtres qui ouvrent sur la face intérieure de l’anneau ; le bâtiment périphérique est divisé en cellules, dont chacune traverse toute l’épaisseur du bâtiment ; elles ont deux fenêtres, l’une vers l’intérieur, correspondant aux fenêtres de la tour ; l’autre donnant sur l’extérieur, permet à la lumière de traverser la cellule de part en part ... Il suffit alors de placer un surveillant dans la tour centrale, et dans chaque cellule d’enfermer un fou, un malade, un condamné, un ouvrier, ou un écolier. Par l’effet du contre-jour, on peut saisir de la tour, se découpant exactement sur la lumière, les petites silhouettes captives dans les cellules de la périphérie.¹⁶⁶

The Panopticon is based on a straightforward concept: those locked up in the cells have been made available for observation. The disposition of bodies in a conveniently arranged space effortlessly imposes on them the power of the gaze. Similarly at the dance school, mirrors and the eyes of teachers – although not as central and unique as in Bentham’s Panopticon – work in a similar manner. The dancers have been placed in a closed space where they are constantly observed. Moreover the disciplinary advantage of the system lies in the impossibility of determining when one is observed. Prisoners in the cells cannot see the eyes of the prison warden on them; at the dance school the multiplicity of sources of observation (the teachers’ and other dancers’ gaze reflected in mirrors) renders the certitude of being watched over, or not, almost impossible.

2.2.6 Constant visibility and perpetual performance

In *Surveiller and punir*, whose subtitle is *Naissance de la prison*, Michel Foucault’s deconstruction of Bentham’s invention allows him to understand, through the changes in the penal system, the development of society at large. Amongst many of Foucault’s

¹⁶⁶ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 233.

conclusions, one of the most important reveals that our world is one of surveillance. Foucault draws a parallel between the prison cells and small theatres, between prisoners and actors (performers):

Autant de cages, autant de petits théâtres, où chaque acteur est seul, parfaitement individualisé et constamment visible. Le dispositif panoptique aménagé des unités spatiales qui permettent de voir sans arrêt et de reconnaître aussitôt.¹⁶⁷

Alongside the concept of constant visibility (in the cell vs. on stage), the idea of performance contained in the metaphor with the actor is absorbed in the prisoner. The body enclosed in the field of vision acts his/her role as a prisoner and performs in the cell. In a similar fashion the dancer is spatially enclosed in the dance school, and the dancer is permanently watched performing a role. Our 'société panoptique' entails the surveillance of others, and the never-ending necessity to perform on (an invisible) stage.

2.2.7 Dualistic roles for the subject within the network of gazes

To complete my exploration of the layered implementation of Foucauldian 'discipline' in Nothomb's fictive opera school, I shall return once more to *Surveiller et punir*, where we read:

Celui qui est soumis à un champ de visibilité, et qui le sait, reprend à son compte les contraintes du pouvoir; il les fait jouer spontanément sur lui-même; il inscrit en soi le rapport de pouvoir dans lequel il joue simultanément les deux rôles; il devient le principe de son propre assujettissement.¹⁶⁸

In relation to others and to themselves, the dancers are, paradoxically, simultaneously the victims and the perpetrators of this network of gazes. In *Robert des noms propres* over the course of a few pages (121-126), Plectrude gradually comes to accept all the difficult requirements of the School, and to happily apply them to her own case: 'Ce qui, jusque-là, l'avait scandalisée, lui semblait maintenant normal' (127). After some 'dégraissage[s]' (123) in the troops,¹⁶⁹ the teachers gather the remaining students in a room to explain and justify the hardships they need endure. Following their speech,

¹⁶⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 233.

¹⁶⁸ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 236.

¹⁶⁹ It is interesting to return to the double meaning of the word 'dégraissage' here; it evokes departures via the image of a loss of extra fat. This lost fat, could refer to students who left the school, but also to the body weight that the dancers in the school lost since their joining the institution.

‘Plus aucune ne partit. Le message avait été bien reçu. Comme quoi l’on peut accepter les pires disciplines, pourvu qu’elles vous soient expliquées’ (126). The young dancers are literally brainwashed: ‘Son esprit était subjugué, à la lettre: sous le joug des professeurs, leur donnant raison en tout’ (129). In line with Foucault’s explanation, the epitome of discipline is reached when the prisoner becomes his/her own jailer; Plectrude has understood the requirements of the School and no threat is necessary to see her follow them. She has internalised the process and gone beyond the status of the docile and disciplined body: she is now fully self-disciplined. This system is very advantageous for the School because, as Foucault points out, ‘le pouvoir externe, lui, peut s’alléger de ses pesanteurs physiques’ and become ‘incorporel’, without the need for a physical figure of authority (it is contained in the self-disciplined dancers).¹⁷⁰ As power becomes a-corporeal, so does the individual who incarnates it. In the next section, I explore the excesses of self-discipline in the form of anorexia as Plectrude loses the ability to appraise (and control) her own physical transformations.

2.3 Anorexic responses to institutional shaping

2.3.1 *Anorexia: contemporary (critical) landscape*

In the introductory part of this chapter, I identified two *moteurs* to Nothomb’s literary project – (the fear of) childhood’s end, and monstrosity – and the ensuing investigation of the multiple and traumatic metamorphoses of adolescence. The difficulty of maintaining or recovering (the body of) childhood revolves around the need to slow down or reverse the maturation process: dieting would seem to offer just the answer. As Catherine Rodgers explains,

Dieting enables the anorexic to reverse the maturation process: womanly fat is lost, periods are suspended. Unable to face the conflicting demands made on adult women in patriarchal society, the anorexic regresses to pre-puberty.¹⁷¹

The themes of dieting and anorexia emerge as prominent features in Nothomb’s texts from the outset of her literary project. Her first novel *Hygiène de l’assassin* portrays two children’s extreme devotion to retain their childish physiques through lifestyle and

¹⁷⁰ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 236.

¹⁷¹ Rodgers, ‘Nothomb’s Anorexic Beauties’, p. 57.

dietary control.¹⁷² Since 1992, the theme of anorexia has been a recurring motif in Nothomb's oeuvre, and critics have even remarked on the omnipresence of anorexia and the issues it raises (as subject matter, background and driving force for the narration).¹⁷³ In *Robert des noms propres*, dieting is a component part to the daily life of the *ballerines* at the Opera School. Plectrude is a docile body whose extreme self-discipline, as I explain later, takes her from (apparent) total control to absence of control over her body and her food intake. Barbara Brook explains,

The woman exhibiting anorexic behaviour would seem to be one of the most exemplary docile bodies of our society in terms of exerting an inexorable will over recalcitrant flesh. Yet she is penalised by being classified as psychiatrically disordered when she has most obeyed society's injunctions. In her attempt to erase her body she seems to expose the ultimate logic of being a "good girl" and a "dutiful daughter".¹⁷⁴

Brook underlines the disconnection between the display of complete discipline (in the form of excessive bodily control and taming) and society's excluding response, despite being its initiator. The question of obedience/dutifulness has been analysed by Shirley Jordan in Nothomb's *Antéchrista*. She writes that Blanche, the teenage heroine, 'demonstrates her compulsion to conform to a pre-ordained bodily appearance as well as her inherent resistance to such tyranny'. In her article, the dualistic response (acceptation-rejection) to the imposition of bodily standards is deployed via the motif of separation between the body and the self.¹⁷⁵ In this chapter, I would argue that the monstrous is a creative and powerful response to the dualism between acceptance and rejection of the rules of the institution. Plectrude's anorexia – a direct consequence of her contentious environment – is in turn a form of (bodily) disappearance that I shall investigate in conjunction with the loss of boundaries and the eruption of the monstrous. My analysis draws from Brook's and similarly explores anorexia as a paradox; following her position, the paradox lies within society's simultaneous instigation and

¹⁷² Amélie Nothomb, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992). The whole story is (about) a painful "retour en arrière": Yolande Helm notes that, 'le récit n'est pas chronologique mais à contresens.' See: Helm, 'Amélie Nothomb', p. 2. Moreover, the successful pursuit of childhood dreams seems dependent on bodily transformation. As is often the case with Nothomb, behind (childish) naivety hides (body) manipulation. See for instance *Mercurie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998) in which a naïve young girl has apparently been saved by an old man who keeps her captive on a remote island.

¹⁷³ G. Séné and B. Kabuth, 'Anorexie mentale et fantasmes. À propos de l'œuvre d'Amélie Nothomb', *Neuropsychiatrie de l'enfance et de l'adolescence*, 52 (2004), 44–51 (p. 51).

¹⁷⁴ Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p. 70. See also: *Corporealities: dancing knowledge, culture and power*, ed. by Susan Leigh Foster (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁷⁵ Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 272.

rejection of it. The issue of situating society's position with anorexia remains unresolved today, in France and in other cultures and nations,¹⁷⁶ and it has become a recurrent motif within literary investigation amongst French women writers.¹⁷⁷ Just as anorexia can entail a multitude of responses, Damlé explains that the different approaches to interpret it have 'ranged from the medical to the media, the psychoanalytical to the sociological, the feminist to the postmodern, not to mention various intersecting and interdisciplinary combinations of approach'.¹⁷⁸ With regards to Nothomb's oeuvre, critics have read anorexia in conjunction for instance with themes of control and beauty images,¹⁷⁹ the fairytale, trauma, the troubled mother-child relationship and bodily violence,¹⁸⁰ and as a platform to explore the literary expression of phantasms.¹⁸¹ Concerning anorexia in *Robert*, Damlé writes:

Catalysed within the environment of the ballet school, Plectrude's anorexia invites other interpretations in testifying to stringent demands to achieve the dancer's athletic body [...] that aspires to a superhuman state attained through control and resilience.¹⁸²

The interpretation she proposes is in line with Deleuzian feminism, as she reads the anorexic body in a conversation between notions of becoming, resistance and representation.¹⁸³ Because of the potentially "shocking" association between anorexia and becoming, she explains that, 'To think through anorexia as a bodily becoming, or a form of invention, is not to commend it, merely to attempt to open out the complexities of its signifying (designifying, resignifying) practices'.¹⁸⁴ In accordance with this precept, I expose in my study another facet to anorexia. I read it as an expression of

¹⁷⁶ Amaleena Damlé, 'The Becoming of Anorexia and Text in Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres* and Delphine de Vigan's *Jour sans faim*', in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France*, ed. by Damlé and Rye, pp. 113-26 (p. 113). She also notes that anorexia 'has become the (gendered) turn-of-the-millennium epidemic to rival late nineteenth-century hysteria'. (p. 113).

¹⁷⁷ Damlé provides an overview of some of these authors: Nina Bouraoui, Othilie Bailly, Geneviève Brisac, Claudine Galea, Marie Darrieussecq, Anada Devi, Sabrina Kherbiche, Nathalie Maciel, and Delphine de Vigan. See: Damlé, 'The Becoming of Anorexia', p. 114.

¹⁷⁸ Damlé, 'The Becoming of Anorexia', p. 114.

¹⁷⁹ Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 58. Moreover, Rodgers raises the following interrogation: is Nothomb's restriction to only one type of 'anorexic beauty' a symptom of (creative) starvation/exhaustion? (p. 61).

¹⁸⁰ Siobhán McIlvanney, "'Il était une fois...': trauma and the fairytale in Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres*", *Dalhousie French Studies*, 81 (2007), 19-28.

¹⁸¹ Séné and Kabuth, 'Anorexie mentale et fantasmes'.

¹⁸² Damlé, 'The Becoming of Anorexia', p. 118.

¹⁸³ On the relationship between the anorexic body and spectacular representation, see for instance: Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook, 'The haunted flesh: corporeal feminism and the politics of (dis)embodiment', *Signs*, 24 (1998), 37-67.

¹⁸⁴ Damlé, 'The Becoming of Anorexia', note 2 p. 125.

bodily and psychological transformation (Damlé's 'becoming'), which sits at the crossroads between submission and resistance to the disciplinary institution. Indeed, the monstrous subject is born at this juncture, and born of the unsustainable bodily (and psychological) state of anorexia. I will also investigate whether anorexia may be read alongside notions of salvation of the subject, interrogating what may bring about salvation, and whether this would offer instances of liberation of the subject. Expanding from Damlé's presentation of the environment of the ballet school as a catalyst to Plectrude's anorexia, I have focused first on the functioning of the disciplinary institution in order to explain that it not only propels but also inculcates in Plectrude the methods that essentially cause anorexia. As discipline regulates daily routine and infiltrates the dancers' lifestyle at the School, power penetrates all strata within the establishment, reaching all bodies in the most intimate degree. The institution simultaneously encapsulates the place and the means that "fabricate" the docile anorexic body which eventually drifts into monstrosity.

2.3.2 Dualisms and conflicts: between (excessive) body control and "oubli de soi"

The exploration of the Panopticon as a component of Foucault's analysis of 'Discipline' has highlighted the element of dualism in the role(s) of the disciplined subjects. In relation to other students, the dancer at the Opera School functions as "transmitter-receiver" of the disciplinary gaze. On an individual level, (self-)discipline enables the submissive reception as well as the independent, voluntary application of the rules of the institution. The governing system in the establishment, similar to an autarky, is based on the autonomous application-diffusion of power by its members, which in turn symbolically eradicates the need for a teacher/discipliner. In light of the analysis of the double role of the subject in the disciplinary institution, this next section demonstrates that this double role of the main character (almost a split personality) provides the (brainwashed) self-disciplined dancer with an over-powering mind intentionally forgetful of the body. The monstrous metamorphosis occurs when the anorexic subject (mistakenly) thinks she can forget her body (and her bodily pains). However, the physical state brought about by her anorexia (and signified by the monstrous) is not sustainable and the subject is eventually brought back down to earth (her attempt at 'envol' fails), and to bodily realities (her fall "confronts" the dancer with her broken/diseased body).

In the novel, Plectrude displays this double role: she becomes first a docile body who “receives” discipline and she complies to corporeal standards (which are imposed and monitored by the professors); gradually she becomes self-disciplined and she herself imposes on her own body the standards of the institution. Indeed, Plectrude’s unceasing surveillance of her body rapidly transforms into an obsession with the body; she goes even further than the rules of the school and imposes intransigent standards upon herself. The example of her total elimination of calcium intake (146) – this ‘autodestruction de l’intérieur’¹⁸⁵ – will unveil that she has also gone past the limits of the resistance of her body. Despite her full acceptance of the school rules, the young dancer retains ‘à l’intérieur de sa tête, la voix de l’enfance’ which whispers words of revolt (129). The teachers are compared to rats ‘avec de grandes dents pour ronger la viande sur le corps des ballerines’ (129). This childish metaphor may be understood as a part of her self/body refusing the physical torture of the school, and as a warning against the dangerous self-inflicted dietary restrictions (the disturbing metaphor of the teachers gnawing the meat off their bodies is a visual “staged” representation / mise en scène of her own bodily diminishing). These words of revolt to resist the rules could also be the forerunner to other forms of conflict, linked with anorexia. With ‘Ici, on exige de nous ce qui est surhumain’ (130) we understand that Plectrude will have to transcend her body and override the limits of the human physique if she is to achieve her (impossible) goal. Essentially Plectrude is on her own; she affronts the gulf with family and friends (she is referred to as ‘une étrangère [qui] ... ne faisait plus partie de leur groupe’ (147)), as well as her teachers (131): ‘En son for intérieur, la petite, qui avait appris à danser contre ses professeurs, apprit aussi à vivre contre sa famille’ (141). This alienation and the consequential solitude are the first triggers to the motif of *oubli de soi*, which also announces the forthcoming process of internal separation.

These various privations of (read, separations from) food, family comfort, teacher support and body resources economy nonetheless vouch for the success of her aim. As Foucault explains, the system of ‘gratification-sanction’ justifies the presence of hardships and punishment.¹⁸⁶ Even if the difficult customs of the School differ somewhat from punishment (‘sanction’), they can nonetheless be seen as the required hardships in view of the ‘gratification’ to come. The ultimate ‘gratification’ granted to the students is simply to allow them to dance: ‘La récompense arriva: on dansa’ (126). As the teachers of the School explain, dance is not a means but a reward:

¹⁸⁵ Dusailant-Fernandes, ‘Écriture du corps’, p. 7.

¹⁸⁶ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 212.

Danser, cela se mérite. Danser, danser sur une scène devant un public, est le plus grand bonheur du monde. A vrai dire, même sans public, même sans scène, danser est l'ivresse absolue. Une joie si profonde justifie les sacrifices les plus cruels. [...] Huit heures à la barre par jour et un régime de famine, cela ne paraîtra dur qu'à celles qui n'ont pas assez envie de danser. (125-26)

The differentiation between dance as a means and dance as a 'récompense' justifies the physical hardships and other various privations, and puts the activity on a superior level. The discovery and "understanding" of the true nature of dance (a religion, 127) almost transforms the dancers as the chosen few, God's elects, with the "holy task" of achieving the right to dance. From this moment on in the story Plectrude's perception of bodily hardships changes: she views them as the necessary steps towards the achievement of her goal. In a nutshell, Plectrude has come to reject anything obstructing her path and preventing her to concentrate on her quest; she alienates her family and friends, "fattening" foodstuffs, hunger, metamorphoses and body pains.

The obsession with the reward is synonymous with an obsession with the body. Plectrude sets out to seize control of her body and learns about a common practice in the school amongst dancers : 'avalant des pilules interdites qui bloquaient certaines mutations de l'adolescence' (127). In her first novel *Hygiène de l'assassin* Nothomb's portrayal of the attempt by two young characters to control (interrupt) the metamorphoses of puberty ends with the murder of the female adolescent (by her male cousin) as she menstruates for the first time. Indeed both this murder and the anti-puberty pills at the Opera School seek to interrupt the menstruating cycle and the hormonal and physical changes of adolescence. They both represent a disruption of the life cycle, and an attempt to control physical and psychological human development. Moreover, the pills point to a denial of the human who cannot exist in the disciplinary institution. Indeed no human body (child or adult) can conform fully to the standards required by the dance school and only monstrous shapes can emerge from this environment.

Weight loss is another means to control the body and at the School, it is never sensed as a bad thing: 'On n'était jamais trop squelettique' (121). As Plectrude celebrates weight loss (131-2), we understand that she becomes psychologically manipulated: not only her body but also her mind are empowered by the necessities to reach her aim. Plectrude does not seem to have full control over her food deprivations. Despite the intense pains in her legs she bears the suffering which she knows is due to

the absence of calcium in her diet (145). The visual description of atrocious physical pains – ‘un supplice digne d’une séance de torture’ (146) – results in the reader (and the character) focusing entirely on the body and its remaining strength. She knows her calcium deficiency is the cause of her pains,

Pourtant, elle ne put se décider à reprendre de ce maudit yaourt. Sans le savoir, elle était victime de la machine intérieure de l’anorexie, qui considère chaque privation comme irréversible, sauf à ressentir une culpabilité insoutenable. (146)

However, Plectrude does not stop there: ‘Elle perdit encore deux kilos, ce qui la confirma dans l’idée que le yaourt maigre était “lourd”’ (147). Later, we read: ‘Son poids: trente-deux kilos. Il lui semblait parfois qu’elle n’avait jamais eu de vie avant’ (148). The young girl’s obsession with the control of her body has actually dragged her in a vicious circle; in an attempt to monitor her diet she has become a slave to it, unable to stop losing weight. The examination of her tense relationship with food and her own body image permits us to speculate on a merging between the body and the self. As she loses another two kilos and sinks deeper into the torments of anorexia, Plectrude feels that she is truly alive for the first time ever. She is born when her body is in its most fragile state and when everything depends on its resistance (133). In a chapter entitled ‘Interpreting Anorexia Nervosa’, Noelle Caskey examines the pathology:

It is the literal mindedness of anorexia to take “the body” as a synonym for “the self”, and to try to live in the world through a manipulation of “the body”, particularly as it is reflected to the anorexic by the perceived wishes of others. [...] Will alone produces it and maintains it against considerable physical odds.¹⁸⁷

The forerunners of Plectrude’s collapse are manifold; nonetheless she decides to ignore them and attempts to remain stronger than the body/pains: she imposes upon herself ‘des amnésies volontaires’ (144). Plectrude, following the dance school’s rhetoric, assumes a mind/body separation that she is unable to sustain. The already unstable relationship between the subject, the body and the mind is all the more disturbed by Nothomb as Plectrude “becomes” her body and its pains. Her excessive dietary and physical hygiene entrap her in a confusing relationship between body and self, of which she becomes the prisoner. Dedication for dance and the endorsement of the rules of the School manipulate her body and eventually manipulate her. As Caskey explains, the

¹⁸⁷ Noelle Caskey, ‘Interpreting Anorexia Nervosa’, in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 175-89 (p. 184).

heroine is at the start dependent on the standards of the institution and its requirements regarding her physique (the body ‘as it is reflected to the anorexic by the perceived wishes of others’). Consequently, it leads the young dancer to a frenzy of control of her body, which gradually turns into oblivion of the body; eventually the main character becomes unable to sustain the illusion of the mind/body division. This duality is a struggle of domination; the self mastering the body and the body resisting it. As I will show in Part Four of this chapter, the monstrous is an embodiment of this struggle: the problematic notion of mind-body separation/merging points to the fragility of the subject and of her (internal) boundaries which, eventually, the monstrous encapsulates.

2.3.3 *Anorexia as submission and resistance*

Plectrude’s control over her body (its daily functioning and hormonal development) can be interpreted as a dangerous disruption of the life cycle. On the spectrum of control, her experience ranges from (apparent) total self-control to an absolute absence of control. As Plectrude imposes strict dieting upon herself, her anorexia becomes a form of (controlled)¹⁸⁸ submission to the rules of the school, which subsequently entails entrapment as the will to diet becomes the inability to eat (she loses control over eating as a bodily function). This leads the young anorexic to dissociate starvation and physical suffering: the inability to eat transforms into supreme body control in the form of voluntary starvation.¹⁸⁹ Anorexia therefore emerges as a form of resistance which (seemingly) empowers Plectrude to reach her ballet aims. Overall, anorexia can be understood as a multitude of (paradoxical) associations. As Caskey writes, ‘Refusing to eat is supremely defiant and supremely obedient at the same time’.¹⁹⁰ The simultaneous entrapment and empowerment caused by anorexia resonates with the paradoxical association of submission with resistance. The merging (loss) between the self, the body and its pains exposes the unsustainable nature of this new entity. As I will show later, the monstrous represents just such an embodiment, and signals towards its imminent (internal) fracture.

¹⁸⁸ On the importance of control with regards to anorexia and its central role in the life of the anorexic, see for instance: Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) and Morag MacSween, *Anorexic Bodies: A Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁸⁹ The control of food intake is present in voluntary starvation and also in other forms of (non-) eating: ‘Le dictionnaire Robert lui fournit l’alimentation qu’elle n’avait plus’ (130). However, she opts for the orderliness and rigidity of a dictionary (rather than prose or poetry): with Plectrude, even the example of “non-food nurturing” translates a form of regulated nourishment.

¹⁹⁰ Caskey, ‘Interpreting anorexia nervosa’, p. 181.

Robert des noms propres offers at this stage of the story, once Plectrude's will to control her body seems to have taken control of her, mainly two types of bodies. The separation appears to be made between the active and the flabby bodies; however, the real schism exists between Plectrude's and her family's bodies (141). Here I observe yet again another form of fracture. There is an association between the apparent sluggishness of Plectrude's family's bodies and their lives, devoid of a goal, contrary to her energetic (contained) body in perpetual search for her quest.¹⁹¹ Indeed their own sprawling bodies and their "earthy", profane preoccupations weight them down: family life is 'composée essentiellement de repas et d'avachissement' (137); even Roselyne, her only friend, now bores and even horrifies Plectrude with her teenage gossip (139-141). As Plectrude's weight has fallen down 'au-dessous de la barre symbolique des quarante kilos' (131), the symbolic "weight line" becomes a 'barrière qui sépare les plus de quarante kilos des moins de quarante kilos' (140, my emphasis). Plectrude reaches another stage: her perception of others' bodies is altered (139); more alarmingly, forty kilos is described as 'ce poids d'obèse' (132).

The young dancer, visibly anorexic, is caught in a vicious circle of food privations – which are not sensed as such anymore – and continuous weight loss. Her body image is not abnormal to her either as Plectrude is affected by Body Image Distortion Syndrome (BIDS). Hilde Bruch first described this syndrome as a 'disturbance in size awareness'¹⁹² in the case of patients suffering from illnesses related to eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia). In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo explains that the first understanding of BIDS as a visuo-spatial problem, that is to say a problem of perception, categorised anorexia as a purely medical type of illness. In brief, the hypothetical implication of culture and society as triggers to the illness was ignored.¹⁹³ The new conceptualisation of BIDS 'as affective or cognitive rather than perceptual'¹⁹⁴ indeed recognises the role of culture and "minimises" the role of the medical. More importantly, this new conceptualisation acknowledges the intersection between the medical and the cultural, and it testifies that the medical and the cultural should not

¹⁹¹ Susan Bordo has explored the anorexic's need to control bodily tightness and boundaries. She writes, 'The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, "bolted down", firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control. Areas that are soft, loose, or "wiggly" are unacceptable, even on extremely thin bodies.' See: Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Culture and the Body* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 190-91.

¹⁹² Bruch, p. 89.

¹⁹³ Bordo, p. 56.

¹⁹⁴ Bordo, p. 57.

(indeed cannot) be separated when dealing with conditions (such as anorexia) which are so closely attached to their specific socio-cultural contexts. Bordo writes that ‘Culture not only has taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical “improvement”; it also is constantly teaching women (and, let us not forget, men as well), how to *see* bodies.’¹⁹⁵ Society has imposed ideals of beauty that have gradually become standards.¹⁹⁶ The establishment of these norms of beauty has trained women (and men) to constantly check, exercise, feed – and starve - their bodies, slowly turning them into docile bodies. In *Robert des noms propres*, Nothomb offers a poignant portrayal of an establishment representative of a disciplinary institution. In the school, the processes that manipulate subjects and control their bodies are all the more severe/visible here because of the very type of establishment (a prestigious ballet school). Ballet may represent the epitome of bodily discipline, but it also conveys the principles of necessary fulfilment of bodily standards characteristic of our contemporary society.

In conclusion to Part Three, Plectrude is intentionally oblivious of the signs of her physical degradation, and her “looking away” can be understood as a form of (not) seeing the body. She is blind to her health condition because the unique focus is the body – not as a “living” entity, but as a pure inconvenience, as mere weight. And her obvious inability to assess body weight renders the association “body equals weight” even more alarming. Her inability to see others (for who they are, rather than in opposition to her) and to see herself (to assess her body and health) points to an identity struggle, and a struggle to maintain definite boundaries between the self and the outside. Whilst I will show next that anorexia leads to her becoming monstrous, it could also be said that Plectrude also experiences/sees monstrosity in (the bodies of) others, a form of monstrosity that could well be an anticipation and a reflection of her own. In the first part of this chapter, I explored the relationship between changing bodies, transitional periods in life and the repercussions on the integrity of the self. Plectrude (and her anorexia) represent the epitome of resistance to the metamorphosing adolescent (body) as the institution attempts to control it. *Robert des noms propres* portrays the excess of discipline as it is imposed on bodies “in transition” to ensure their display of societal requirements. In the fourth and final part of this chapter, the monstrous emerges as a complex response to such an excess.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ A detailed examination of the establishment of standards of physical appearance as means to control women can be found in: Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1991).

2.4 Monstrous transformations: the (failed) escape of/from the disciplined body

2.4.1 *Crossing the species barrier: 'envol' and/as transgression*

In this final part of my chapter, I aim to demonstrate that Plectrude's metamorphosis (and the subsequent fall) appear almost as unavoidable consequences in her story. Plectrude is a self-disciplined docile body in a disciplinary institution, and I have shown that her standards of bodily control exceed even those imposed by the dance school. Despite the enduring illusion of control over her body and its adolescent transformations (explored in Part Three), the severity of her anorexic condition eventually becomes unbearable and unsustainable. I contend that the character's final metamorphosis into a bird points to the limits of her body, but also to those of an institution where no human subject can exist, and where the inappropriate rules refer to those in our contemporary society.

Before I pursue this final part, it should be remembered that Amélie Nothomb is not the first author to explore creatively the intersections between the "flying" female artistic body and a bird. Angela Carter in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) portrays a half-human half-bird female aerialist whose discipline, similarly to Plectrude's, bestows on the artist the transcendental skill/sensation of being able to fly. The difference between the two characters must however be highlighted. Carter's story is set on a backdrop of magical realism and the protagonist Fevvers appears as a winged human being. On the contrary in Nothomb's text the transformations that the character undergoes all belong to the known/possible experiences of human life (adolescent transformations and anorexia), and the metamorphosis into a bird remains metaphorical (unlike Fevvers, Plectrude does not appear as a bird and she remains fully human).

As this section shows, the Holy Grail of the dancer (and thus Plectrude's high aim) is the access to the sensation of flying that the discipline bestows. The extreme dietary and physical manipulations aim at a transcendence of the body and a surpassing of its limits (in the form of an unstable metamorphosis). At the dance school Plectrude discovers that 'le Graal du ballet, c'est l'envol', and that 'qui a appris la technique de la sissone, de l'entrechat, du grand jeté en avant, ne peut plus en douter: ce qu'on cherche à lui enseigner, c'est l'art de s'envoler' (134). As Nothomb writes, 'le ballet classique est l'ensemble des techniques visant à présenter comme possible et raisonnable l'idée de

l'envol humain' (135-36). This 'trance de l'envol' is a form of out-of-body experience that Nothomb compares to 'ivresse' and 'extase' (144). Indeed, 'si l'extase est la capacité de sortir de soi-même, la danse est une manière de s'élever dans l'espace'.¹⁹⁷ This announces a 'dépassement' that in turn entails the fragility of (bodily and identity) boundaries. The access to this unique bodily sensation justifies all the (self-imposed) torture: 'Le Graal était l'envol et, de tous les chevaliers, Plectrude était la plus proche de l'atteindre. Que lui importaient les douleurs nocturnes en regard de l'immensité de sa quête?' (148). In the race to the Holy Grail, Plectrude the knight is about to achieve her quest first. In the context of the Opera School, this could be interpreted as the young girl being the farthest from human corporeality.¹⁹⁸ When still a little girl at her local dance school, she is described as possessing 'ce miracle de la sveltesse'. Nothomb continues: 'Sa légèreté insultait aux lois de la pesanteur' (75). At the Opera School, in order to achieve the 'envol', Plectrude needs to go beyond the 'insulte' towards a transgression of the rules of the body as well as those of physics and gravity. The lighter she becomes, the closer to take off she will be.

The idea of 'envol' is described as 'un projet aussi dingue' (136) because, aside from the manifold self-imposed physical mutilations, a change of species is necessary. 'Mais si un humain a le projet invraisemblable de changer d'espèce et d'apprendre à voler, il est normal qu'il doive y consacrer plusieurs années d'exercices exténuants' (135). Extreme physical effort and suffering evoke the (unnatural) bodily manipulations required to cross species, and subsequently point to the instability of the metamorphosis as a process and a result. The 'transgressive and transformative'¹⁹⁹ nature of monsters highlights this instability: Plectrude's progressive transformation into a bird coincides with the moment when her body is closest to exhaustion. Just as much as she cannot

¹⁹⁷ In his novel *La Sorcière de Portobello*, Paulo Coelho continues: 'Découvrir de nouvelles dimensions, et cependant rester en contact avec son corps. Avec la danse, le monde spirituel et le monde réel parviennent à cohabiter sans conflits. Je pense que les danseurs classiques restent sur la pointe des pieds parce qu'ils touchent la terre et en même temps atteignent les cieux.' Paulo Coelho, *La Sorcière de Portobello*, trans. from Portuguese by Françoise Marchand Sauvagnargues (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), p. 66.

¹⁹⁸ Plectrude has a complex relationship with her body (weight). As a sufferer from anorexia nervosa she is obsessed with her body and weight loss is crucial. She could also be associated with early (often Christian) martyrs who starved themselves to death. Anorexia mirabilis (the miraculous lack of appetite), which was undertaken by young adolescent and women, was often coupled with other practices of self-mutilation and extreme body discipline. The oblivion of the body (as an unnecessary profane irritation) and its complete mastery was a sign of extreme religious dedication (in the case of Plectrude, devotion to dance) and a step closer to divine ascension ('envol' for Plectrude). See: Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985).

¹⁹⁹ Shildrick, p. 4.

remain in this unhealthy state, neither can she find stability in the dynamic process of the (metaphorical) metamorphosis. The dancers at the Opera School are moored to ‘la barre’ for hours in order to exercise their bodies and train to “become birds”. Indeed ‘la barre [...] est un perchoir’ and ‘Quand on rêve de s’envoler, on enrage d’être contraint à s’amarrer à un morceau de bois, des heures durant, alors que l’on sent dans ses membres l’appel de l’air libre’ (134-35). With the use of ‘l’appel de l’air libre’ we feel that the dancers are already metamorphosing into birds; their legs are not specifically ‘jambes’ but more vaguely called ‘membres’; their “natural animal instinct” attracts them to open space.

2.4.2 ‘Envol’: a fantasised escape

Similarly to chicks, dancers leave the nest/home when they learn to fly. In the case of the young heroine, dance and ‘envol’ are compared to ‘une drogue dure’ (136), which entails a dependence on the activity but also as we have seen, a physical entrapment of the body in the vicious circles of eating disorders. Dance and ‘envol’ are also presented to the pupil as the rewards of physical suffering. Moreover dance and more particularly ‘envol’ can be understood first as the action to take off: it is the ultimate and most craved achievement of both the dancer and her art. Finally ‘envol’ could be understood in the sense of flight, flying away, and escape.

In summary, ‘envol’ is a fantasised form of escape. Plectrude’s project of ultimate body control is paired with a dream of defying the laws of gravity, and being able to take off. Indeed when Plectrude ‘se jet[te] dans l’espace’ (135), she displays the great mastery of her bird/dancer body apparently able to fly. This mise en scène offers the fruit of the mastery of the body, but also of space. Plectrude’s lifelong passion for mise en scène is systematically accompanied with an expression of bodily transformation, and it also appears in other previous episodes in *Robert des noms propres*. I cite for instance the episode in which Plectrude and her friend Roselyne play at becoming snowmen, letting the falling snow cover their bodies entirely (80-88). For Plectrude, it creates ‘une impression formidable, surhumaine, celle d’une lutte [...] mais aussi d’une sérénité remarquable’ (83). Roselyne, on the other hand, ‘pens[ait] qu’elle [Plectrude] déraillait: il fallait toujours qu’elle mît en scène son existence, qu’elle se projetât dans le grandiose, qu’elle organisât de sublimes dangers’ (87). However, Plectrude’s taste for mise en scène reaches its apogee at the Opera School as she attempts the performance of ‘envol’. The costume required for this spectacle is also a disguise: Plectrude’s anorexia

causes her to forget her body and her consequential metamorphosis will also translate her own *oubli de soi*.

The young dancer would seem to appear in control of the three dimensions with her ‘*envol*’: she has successfully defied the laws of physics and gone beyond the boundaries of her body. We could also argue that Plectrude’s ‘*envol*’ is a control of space as a three-dimensional concept, but also of the space of the school. The docile body, arranged in space to suit the rules of her institution, ultimately (momentarily) regains control of it. What is more, when she takes off, Plectrude leaves the ground and escapes – the dance room, the school, its rules. Similarly to the chick flying out of the nest, she escapes her home/school. She also evades the confines of her human body that she has trained to resemble a bird. However, this new embodiment is the product of a triple escape: of the body, the species and human identity. The multiple necessary manipulations to transcend the body and its limits point to the instability of the metamorphosis and lead us to question whether any form of escape is at all possible for the subject. Ultimately, Plectrude collapses with ‘unbearable weight’²⁰⁰ and human fragility.

2.4.3 Unavoidable fall and confrontation with the (broken) body/subject

The comparison between chicks and the dancer rests on the shared outcome of take off. If it is in the bird’s nature to fly and to leave the nest, for Plectrude, this unnatural demand over the body cannot result in any “real” form of departure and her escape is therefore only temporary. The short-lived ability to go beyond the rules (of the body and the institution), and the ultimate incapacity to implement any lasting change, are represented in the description of ‘*envol*’ as a ‘*folle illusion*’ (144). Nothomb notes that it is only powered by ‘*une dose énorme d’oubli*’ (144), which signals the necessary disappearance of the subject (encapsulated in the bird metamorphosis) and her submission (to the rules of the institution, and to physical pain). Nothomb adds: ‘*Oubli des privations, de la souffrance physique, du danger, de la peur*’ (144). The character’s ability to forget and look aside is maintained by her relations with her family. Arguably, it is also made stronger via the bond with her mother; in Plectrude’s eyes, her mother shows a unique understanding which reassures her: ‘*Elle au moins, elle me comprend*’ (147). Conversely, Nothomb writes that ‘*La capacité d’auto-aveuglement des parents*

²⁰⁰ See: Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.

est immense' (142). Indeed, Clémence refuses to see Plectrude's physical degradation as the mother is fulfilling her own dream of becoming a ballet dancer by proxy. This imposes on the adolescent another source of pressure to succeed (further than the self-imposed pressure and the pressure within the opera school) and indeed to forget about physical suffering as, for the mother, 'Peu lui importait de sacrifier la santé de son enfant à cet idéal' (143). Plectrude's father's weak attempts to raise the alarm about his daughter's condition are immediately silenced by Clémence. In front of other family members, Clémence denies Plectrude's visibly unhealthy state (137) and constant weight loss (142). Furthermore, Clémence deliberately chooses not to acknowledge Plectrude's confessed leg pains, and instead she exclaims: 'Que tu es courageuse!' (149). The mother's admiration and compliment only provide Plectrude temporary pleasure and reinforce her sense of solitude (because of the absence of maternal help), and Plectrude does not know happiness: 'il faut à ce dernier un minimum de sentiment de sécurité' (143). Plectrude's deliberate forgetfulness of her body and pains, together with the absence of parental protection and the overall feeling of insecurity at the school, announce the imminent collapse of the subject: concerning Plectrude, Nothomb writes that 'à son stade, elle ne jouait plus avec sa santé, puisqu'elle jouait sa santé' (143-44).

When she forgets her bodily pains, Plectrude forgets and escapes her body. As I showed in Part Three, the anorexic subject's obsession over full control of the body is paired with a symbolic separation (escape) from the body. However, this full control of the body is always unachievable and Plectrude's body ultimately evades her control. I argue that the body that escapes control can be a metaphorical expression of an escape of the body itself. Beyond the precarious relation that Plectrude has entertained with her body (through forgetting and mistreating her own body), the metaphorical escape of her body signals a point of rupture in the subject's (corporeal) identity. When Nothomb writes, 'Ce qui devait arriver arriva' (149), her words may initially translate a degree of fatalism, but most evidently they point to an inevitable (because "logical") turn/resolution in Plectrude's story. This symbolic breaking point is expressed in the text via actual collapse and fracture. We read, 'Un matin de novembre, comme Plectrude venait de se lever en mordant son chiffon pour ne pas hurler de douleur, elle s'effondra: elle entendit un craquement dans sa cuisse' (149).

If there seems to be no limits to physical hardships and human degradation in the disciplinary institution, this fall signifies that the subject cannot indefinitely escape her

body nor choose to forget her suffering. The consequential fracture is a painful staged reminder of the fragility of the human body, and of having gone beyond multiple limits – of the human body but also of human identity; the monstrous indeed shows and warns about these dangers. Additionally, Plectrude’s doctor is scandalised by the dancer’s physical state, by her abnormally weak and breakable bones and by her anorexic body weight (150). For the first time, Plectrude is confronted with her unacceptable state, and she must also answer for such physical mistreatment. Whether a consequence of stringent bodily standards, self-imposed discipline or deliberate negligence by her school, her present state of health cannot be tolerated by the health professional. He threatens to call the police – ‘Plectrude eut l’instinct de protéger son ordre’ (151) – and finally announces the verdict: ‘Mademoiselle, vous ne pourrez plus jamais danser’ (151).

This ultimate confrontation with the limits of her body leaves Plectrude to assess the damage: her extreme devotion to her art, to her school and its rules eventually cost her not only her professional ambition but also a cherished physical activity. Plectrude loses her place (she is removed from the dance school and taken to the hospital), and her function (she will never be able to be a dancer again). Plectrude’s identity is shattered; she is excluded from the dance school and, apart from her father who visits her at the hospital, she seems to have even lost her place in her family. We read, ‘Cela dura des mois. Personne d’autre ne vint la voir, ni de l’école des rats, ni de sa famille, ni de son ancien collègue: comme quoi Plectrude n’appartenait plus à aucun monde’ (154).

For the character who is left with no identity, this is tantamount to having lost her life: ‘Le coeur de Plectrude cessa de battre. Elle sombra dans une sorte de coma’ (151). Rather than death, this coma situates the subject between life and death, in a state of unconsciousness where she loses all power to act upon (or hurt) her body and where she remains unresponsive to outside stimuli (or from the school’s rules). Symbolically, it provides the character and the reader with pause to reflect on the physical and psychological damage caused to the subject in a disciplinary institution, and on the consequences of the imposition of strict bodily standards. The fall and the fracture forced Plectrude to reverse the processes of ‘illusion’ and ‘oubli’ on which her ‘envol’ depended. She is confronted with the limits of her body and she is made to notice the multiple ruptures that her ambition (and her school) caused to her body and her identity. The collapse of Plectrude’s dream of becoming a professional ballet dancer makes her unable not only to perform but mostly to envisage/fantasise about ‘envol’ and about transformed bird-like physical appearance and abilities. As her dream evaporates, so

does her monstrosity: this could signal that the demands on (the body of) the dancer in the disciplinary institution reached beyond the spectrum of the human and could only result in the apparition of monstrous shapes. The fall would therefore seem to allow an interruption of the monstrous transformation of the subject, but not from her illness, as Plectrude remains a broken body/subject still severely anorexic.

2.4.4 Expressions of redemption of the subject

In *Robert des noms propres*, Plectrude's coma indicates the moment when the machine has to be reset, and when the healing process may begin. The fall therefore forces Plectrude out of the disciplinary institution and opens the possibility for recovery from anorexia. In response to the hypotheses I advanced earlier in this chapter, anorexia has indeed appeared in Nothomb's novel as a paradoxical form of submission and resistance to the rules of the establishment, between bodily disappearance and extraordinary (monstrous) transformation. For the dancer, the deprivations and physical hardships, causative and typical of anorexia, were sensed by the dancer as liberation from the body weight and physical limitations that were preventing her from achieving 'envol'. However, the unsustainable bodily and psychological state caused by the illness and which led to the creation of a monstrous subject demonstrate that anorexia offers no salvation and no liberation of the subject, and that if uninterrupted by an accident (like a fall), anorexia could have cost the subject her life.

Recovery from anorexia cannot be systematically guaranteed and only recovery itself offers salvation of the subject. For this reason, if the fall may be said to trigger the process of recovery, it can only be posited as an indirect salvation of the character. Nonetheless, I argue that this salvation via a fall remains a paradox. To explain the paradoxical nature of this salvation, I must return to the transgression usually associated with the fall and with its opposite 'envol'. Indeed, I showed that the notion of 'envol' requires a transcendence of the human body and a transgression of the laws of physics and gravity and of human identity. The human subject who seeks to perform 'envol' (the move upwards, the take off, the escape) must radically metamorphose her body (becoming monstrous). Shildrick writes that 'the monstrous arouses always the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification'.²⁰¹ Therefore 'envol', because it is ultimately unrealisable by the human

²⁰¹ Shildrick, p. 17.

subject, calls for its opposite move, a fall, which also offers a form of transgression. Moreover, it is paradoxical to evoke a salvation that would entail further harm (a painful fall) to an already fragile subject; especially as for a dancer a fall would evoke a missed step, failure or even nightmares, but not salvation. Therefore, as it is still possible to perceive a form of salvation (if paradoxical) in the fall, it shows that the notion of salvation is in itself an ideal. Consequently, it raises the question (to which I return in the conclusion) of the possible liberation of the subject from institutional control, especially in the case of Plectrude who has undergone strict disciplining and brainwashing in an institution from which she is eventually rejected.

2.5 Conclusion. From docile bodies to monstrous embodiments: responses to discipline in or out of the institution.

My reading of *Robert des noms propres* has unveiled in what measure this text allowed Nothomb to experiment with new forms of bodily monstrosity that convey a powerful message. If monstrosity is less often associated with slender bodies as opposed to heavier physiques (because they are less socially repellent), this text nonetheless proves that the monstrous anorexic can be as much, if not more (visually) shocking, and that it testifies to a need to reassess corporeal standards. The fall and the fracture symbolically force Plectrude to re-enter in contact with her body, to renegotiate its limits, and to develop a different attitude towards her body if she is to recover from anorexia. This new attitude calls for a new perspective on her body on her part, a body that does not display its previous appearance and abilities. She is confronted with a reassessment of her own difference, and with other perceptions of corporeal standards. Her doctor declares that ‘Si vous étiez normale, un mois de plâtre suffirait’ (151), but Plectrude’s “abnormal” (because severely unhealthy) physical state may require an open-ended convalescence, ‘des années de suralimentation en produits laitiers pour [... se] recalcifier’ (152). Reading through the monstrous subject, via the impossible ‘envol’ and the subsequent collapse, therefore invites a reassessment of our understanding of the limits of the human body and of possible forms of corporeal identities.

Reading the functioning of ‘discipline’ and its implementation in the disciplinary institution has allowed me to explore how the subject is tamed to become a docile body who gradually acquires self-discipline. I showed that the extent of institutional control over the individual exceeds the supervision of space, activity, function and even the

body of the character, as it reaches the subject's psychology and her present (and future) relation with her body. Moreover, the autonomous application-diffusion of power entails the dualistic role of its subjects and also evokes the (potentially) unsustainable nature of such a position. The inevitable (internal) fracture is realised through Plectrude and her excessive application of the disciplinary rules inculcated in the Opera School of dance. The numerous methods of bodily control (ranging from daily functioning, such as dieting, to the control of human transformation, such as the interruption of the menstrual cycle) disturb even further the already unstable relationship that the adolescent subject experiences between the changing body and self. Anorexia emerges within these tensions, and encapsulates the trying necessity for the subject to submit to and confront the bodily standards of the institution. The monstrous metamorphoses undergone by Plectrude translate the conflict between control and resistance of the imposition of standards for the body, by a subject who simultaneously accepts, exceeds and defies the rules of the institution.

The excessive discipline and control imposed over the transforming adolescent body (a body "in transition" between childhood and the adult body) is an interruption of the human life cycle addressed in the form of the monstrous. As no human body (child or adult) can conform fully to the standards required by the disciplinary institution, only monstrous shapes can emerge from this environment. Plectrude's transformation into a monstrous character points to the unsustainability and limits of the disciplinary system; indeed, she becomes monstrous as a result of (excessive) discipline but she is still rejected because of corporeal difference and inability. I showed that, contrary to widespread understandings of monstrosity, the monstrous is not born outside society but within the disciplinary institution. It is the product of excessive bodily regulation and the effusion of disturbing incarnations that the institution seeks to exclude. In my next chapter, monstrosity is perceived by the family and the subject in Lorette Nobécourt's *La Démangeaison*, and it is explored via abjection in the complex relationship between the subject and her (visually improper/sick) body. In Chapter 3, I shall expand on the previous discussion on the relationship between the individual and internal/bodily fractures, especially as the subject's difference is inscribed on her face and skin, the body parts that first meet with others, and their rejection.

My analysis of Nothomb's novel allows me to conclude that it is difficult, if not outright impossible, for the docile self-disciplined subject to evade the rules and to find liberation within the disciplinary institution. For the dancer, 'envol' only provides the

illusion of escape and the temporary mastery over the body and space in the school. I have shown that Plectrude's salvation is above all else dependent on her recovery from anorexia, and also that her salvation may be said to rely (indirectly) on a paradoxical fall of the subject. Overall, the expressions of redemption of the subject that I explored in Part Four of this chapter remain limited, which highlighted that salvation is an ideal in the institution. It is my purpose at this stage to enquire whether the subject who has been evicted from the disciplinary institution can achieve a degree of liberation (from institutional control). This final discussion on forms of control in various societal structures also stands in anticipation of further analyses of (fictive) non fully-fledged disciplinary institutions in the following chapters of this thesis.

The access to a form of liberation for Plectrude depends first of all on how society is perceived beyond the school, and on the social structures that the subject integrates after leaving the prestigious establishment. At this stage in her story, Plectrude is a broken subject apparently with no role, no place in her family, and no future. Yet, this distance from the world of classical dance forces upon Plectrude a new assessment of her body and her whole existence, criteria upon which her physical and psychological recovery depend. Following a lengthy and mostly lonely stay at the hospital, Plectrude's return home and her gradual recovery is met with the support of her father and sisters (158). On the other hand, Clémence rejects her daughter whose (now visibly healthier) body definitely annihilates her ambition (by proxy) of being a ballet dancer: 'Si tu t'imagines que tu as l'air d'une danseuse, maintenant!' (160). Plectrude's return home is comparable to a return to another form of disciplinary institution that similarly seeks to control her relationship with her body. The mother's insulting remarks towards Plectrude's physique (which worsen from 'Tu es grosse' (159), to 'tu es obèse' and 'tu es énorme' (164)) are reminiscent of the verbal abuse of children in the opera school (118). Clémence seeks to manipulate Plectrude's relationship with food (162, 168), and to destabilise the adolescent with psychological and emotional pressure. Plectrude is abruptly told that Clémence is not her mother but her aunt: 'Tu n'as jamais été ma fille' (160). Plectrude has therefore re-inserted herself in a controlling structure but she is aware of its dangers ('Je ne te laisserai pas me tuer, maman' (165)), and the young adult strives to gain financial independence in order to flee her mother's noxious influence (166).

The second controlling structure in which Plectrude inserts herself is her deceased mother's path: upon seeing a photograph of Lucette and noticing their resemblance, she concludes that 'Elle pensa que sa mère s'était suicidée à dix-neuf ans

et que ce serait son destin à elle aussi' (169). This "revelation" confines the character in another (invisible) structure that dictates her relation with her body. Like her mother before her, Plectrude births a child at the age of nineteen (175); despite stating 'Je dois mourir: c'est un ordre, je le sens' (176), she evades suicide thanks to outside intervention by her rediscovered childhood love Mathieu Saladin (181). Therefore, these two instances of control of Plectrude show that the subject outside the disciplinary institution keeps on seeking out other forms of control and still remains under institutional hold. This unveils the chameleonic nature of the disciplinary institution and the importance of "a-corporeal" power in the spreading of corporeal and behavioural standards in various areas of society. Moreover, as I will explore in Chapter 3 and 4, this reveals that the family is a powerful social institution that can impose limits and demands on (the body of) the subject.

Nothomb's story assuredly demonstrates that there is no effective/permanent escape or liberation from the controlling power of the disciplinary institution (inside or outside its wall); it also reaches beyond the exposition/criticism of the disciplinary system as limiting for subjects, towards an evocation of other (non-disciplinary) approaches to the ways of being in the body. These two facets in *Robert des noms propres* are encapsulated in the final twist to Plectrude's story, when 'Quelques années avaient passé' (188). Plectrude meets and befriends a character named Amélie Nothomb. She unveils to Plectrude that because of her chaotic life story, and because she is a 'un témoin *in utero*' of her father's murder (by her pregnant mother), she is therefore 'impregnée de ce meurtre'. As Amélie asks Plectrude, 'Comment pourriez-vous ne pas devenir meutrière?' (188-89), she essentially condemns Plectrude to become a murderer herself (188-89), which implies further constriction of the character (judicial; in her mother's path). Plectrude is yet again manipulated into a chain of actions that control her relation with the body (here, the body of others) and eventually condemn her again to a different (moral) form of monstrosity. Another interpretation of this event emerges when Plectrude's (induced) homicidal tendencies turn towards Amélie Nothomb: 'Et comme il y a une forme de justice, elle assouvit son désir d'assassinat sur celle qui le lui avait suggéré' (189). Her justification boils down to 'C'est tout ce que j'ai trouvé pour l'empêcher d'élucubrer' (190), that is to prevent Amélie from dreaming up more stories about Plectrude's seemingly inescapable destiny. The murder of the textually inscribed author reveals a desire to get rid of constricting (disciplinary) structures – textual and societal – that control her life and her relation to the body, and to become the author of her own story. In the next chapter of

this thesis, I will also explore the coming to writing of another monstrous subject; in this case, the need to write will explore the question of coming to terms with one's individual differences in order to reassess the relationships between the self, others, and society. *Robert des noms propres* counters (or at least evokes the need to challenge) the limitations on the subject imposed by the disciplinary system, and it opens different avenues for the appraisal and the writing of different ways of being in the body.

Chapter 3. Monstrosity, psoriasis and abjection in Lorette Nobécourt's *La Démangeaison* and *L'Équarrissage*

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the emergence of the monstrous during another event in the human lifecycle, this time when the subject experiences illness. The analysis of this second form of monstrosity – the monstrous sick subject – will reveal that it is closely connected to the physical appearance and behaviour of the individual, and his/her ability to meet society's standards of visible propriety despite his/her illness. I explore in two texts by Lorette Nobécourt – *La Démangeaison* and *L'Équarrissage*²⁰² – the case of a female subject whose medical condition (a dermatological disease called psoriasis) manifests itself on her body and in her gestures, and greatly affects not only the place of this subject in society and in her context, but also the subject's identity. In Chapter 2, I showed that the docile subject who no longer fulfils the corporeal requirements of the disciplinary institution loses her place and role in this establishment, and eventually faces rejection from the institution. In this chapter, I explore how society's physical and behavioural standards have penetrated the family sphere, dictating relationships between family members. My reading of selected texts by Nobécourt will reveal that the family is a powerful social institution which can impose limits and demands on (the body of) the subject, and which re-enacts society's rejection of subjects (in this case a family member) deemed inappropriate because of physical difference. Furthermore, this third chapter of the thesis offers a progression in the exploration of the rejection of physical difference and in the creation of monstrous subjects. Indeed, social rejection within the family environment brings about a difficulty for the subject to come to terms with her bodily difference made highly visible by her skin condition. In her texts, Nobécourt's imaginative portrayal of psoriasis as causative of monstrosity offers striking images of bodily and psychological invasion of the subject by an internal Other. Julia Kristeva's theorisation of the concept of abjection in

²⁰² Lorette Nobécourt, *La Démangeaison* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994), and, *L'Équarrissage* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2001). The latter text first appeared in *Dix* (Paris: Grasset/Les Inrockuptibles, 1997). Subsequent references to these texts will be from the most recent editions, and subsequent page numbers will be provided in brackets in the text.

*Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*²⁰³ will provide a useful tool to analyse the subject's feeling of internal divide, alienation with her sick body and self-rejection. Ultimately, my analysis aims to demonstrate how Nobécourt's texts invite a reflection on the victimisation of sick subjects deemed monstrous because of unattainable corporeal criteria, and provide a creative space to envisage through the sick and different body and via monstrosity other possible forms of corporeal identities.

3.1.1 Presentation of my corpus and Lorette Nobécourt's life

My argument in this chapter will be deployed through a close textual analysis of two texts by Nobécourt. *La Démangeaison*, published in 1994, is Nobécourt's first novel. It is the troubling narrative of the life of Irène, a young woman whose skin condition – psoriasis – seems to devour firstly her body, and as the story progresses, her mind. I will show that the portrayal of this subject offers a (visually shocking) instance of hybridity and monstrosity due to the physical alterations caused by her illness, and as a result of social rejection and self-rejection. Moreover, with the tale of Irène, the author offers glimpses of her personal experience. Indeed from an early age Nobécourt, like Irène with psoriasis, suffered from eczema, a persistent skin condition that never fully disappears. In an article on Nobécourt published in the section 'Lire' of *L'Express*, Pascale Frey writes about the author's first novel: 'Ce récit raconte l'eczéma qui la fait souffrir depuis qu'elle a trois ans et qui, aujourd'hui encore, dans les moments de stress recommence à la brûler'²⁰⁴. *L'Equarrissage* is Nobécourt's second publication; it first appeared in 1997, three years after *La Démangeaison*, and offers a continuation – arguably, a move towards completion – of the (theme of) self-introspection prompted by her psoriasis and initiated in/via her first novel. In the Preface to the 2001 re-edition of *L'Equarrissage*, Nobécourt presents the original writing of the novella as her 'respiration pendant des mois' (7). Both texts are first-person narratives, but mediate differently the presence of the author through writing and narration.²⁰⁵ They nonetheless share the "same" narrator; she is called Irène in *La Démangeaison*, and Hélène (whom

²⁰³ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

²⁰⁴ Pascale Frey, 'Lorette Nobécourt en sa cellule', in *Lire* (September 2009) <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/lorette-nobecourt-en-sa-cellule_801462.html?xtmc=nobecourt&xtr=4> [accessed 15th January 2015].

²⁰⁵ Shirley Jordan highlights a shared particularity between Amélie Nothomb and Lorette Nobécourt – they are both 'the ultimate subject of all [their] texts' – but nonetheless clarifies that 'the playful narcissism of her [Nothomb's] self-involvement makes the tenor of her writing very different indeed from Nobécourt's.' Jordan, 'Becoming Women', p. 275.

Nobécourt presents as: ““Hélène” (L. N.)” in *L’Equarrissage* (8). With this short account, Nobécourt reaches the depths of her flesh; she enquires and questions the complexities of her body at a difficult time in her personal life. Through the narrative of her illness and the search for recovery, both texts portray differently the subject’s struggle with her internal Other and her metaphorical transformation into a hybrid and monstrous subject. The reconciliation with the character’s hybrid identity is envisaged via bodily introspection, and the investigation of the causes, consequences and answers to her malaise. The discussion will lead me to posit illness as a trigger to the discovery and understanding of the body, and later to a reconfiguration of the self.

Using psoriasis as a trigger for the physical changes happening to the character, Nobécourt creates a subject for whom exterior bodily alterations will ignite the discovery of the complexity of her body and its hybrid nature, and eventually her monstrosity. Nobécourt’s writing offers images of a character (metaphorically) fluctuating between the human state and that of a plant-animal whilst her skin condition is accompanied by this particular feeling of possession by a beast, ‘la chose’ (18). Although biologically fully human (despite the various metaphorical metamorphoses she undergoes), Irène is described as inhabited by another creature, by her “Other”. As I will argue in this chapter, her hybridity is paired with monstrosity. Indeed she oscillates between several states; throughout *La Démangeaison* the issue of control of the self and the body, between Irène and her internal Other, is at stake. Furthermore the frontier between these states (fully human, partly animal-plant) seems to be blurred (causing feelings of abjection) and even in constant motion and change. The monstrous points to the unreliability of these limits and challenges society’s reliance on fixed limits.

Through the tale of the life of Irène, Nobécourt pictures multiples instances of ‘dichotomies’ which Curti identified in her exploration of monstrous subjects.²⁰⁶ However, Curti’s notion of an ‘overcoming of dichotomies’ via hybrid shapes remains questionable in Nobécourt’s writing, and I will unveil other possibilities suggested by this author to think beyond oppositional categories. As I shall argue, the duality and complexity of the self is revealed to the character through the understanding of the body that psoriasis triggers. The (acknowledgement of the) hybrid nature of the subject and her “reconciliation” with her dualities permits the creation of a new composite entity: in this chapter I will examine whether and how Nobécourt suggests new ways of looking

²⁰⁶ Curti, p. 29.

at the monstrous body. In her first novel, and via her novella, Nobécourt not only proposes a new perspective on the writing of the body but also provides a literary space and opening for new ways of being in the body.

3.1.2 *Nobécourt's publications, critical readings and my proposed argument*

La Démangeaison and *L'Equarrissage* aside, Nobécourt has published to date another nine texts.²⁰⁷ Compared to the vast number of articles written on Nothomb's novels, substantially fewer critics have analysed Nobécourt's oeuvre. Amongst their publications, I nonetheless note a focus in their analyses on the representation of the body in Nobécourt's writing,²⁰⁸ and read it in conjunction with other themes typical of the new generation of women writers in France. Amongst them, I note the exploration of the body together with a reading the subject's interactions with his/her environment and with others,²⁰⁹ the tensions in the mother-daughter relationship and the maternal body (through reproduction, abortion and birth),²¹⁰ the notion of culpability, and the exploration of personal/historical testimonies.²¹¹

I opt in this chapter, and throughout the thesis, for an ontological reading of the interactions between the subject and his/her body, as he/she is portrayed in varied moments of human (embodied) life. The analysis of the character's self-introspection

²⁰⁷ *La Conversation* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), *Horsita* (Paris: Grasset, 1999), *Substance* (Paris: Pauvert, 2001), *Nous* (Paris: Pauvert, 2002), *En nous la vie des morts* (Paris: Grasset, 2006) and *L'Usure des jours* (Paris: Grasset, 2007), *Grâce leur soit rendue* (Paris: Grasset, 2011), *Patagonie intérieure* (Paris: Grasset, 2013) and *La Clotûre des merveilles* (Paris: Grasset 2013).

²⁰⁸ See for instance: Madeleine Borgomano, 'Ouvrir Hortense ou l'écorchée vive: *Horsita* de Lorette Nobécourt' in *Nouvelles écrivaines*, ed. by Morello and Rodgers, pp. 233-51; Shirley Jordan, 'The Writing of Lorette Nobécourt: Body Matter(s) and Narrative Acts', in *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, pp. 219-53.

²⁰⁹ See for instance: France Grenaudier-Klijn, 'Le don du soi: la place de l'autre dans les romans de Lorette Nobécourt', in *Hybrid Voices, Hybrid Texts: Women's Writing at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. by Gill Rye (= *Dalhousie French Studies* [Special issue], Autumn 2004), 79-87.

²¹⁰ See for instance: Carine Fréville, 'Avortement et violences maternelles dans les œuvres de Lorette Nobécourt', in *Contemporary Women's Representations of Wounded Bodies and Minds*, ed. by Ana de Medeiros and Carine Fréville (= *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 15 (2012)), 257-75.

Nathalie Morello, 'Avortement/accouchement de soi/de l'autre: le douloureux apprentissage de l'être femme dans la fiction de Nobécourt', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 42 (2005), 122-35.

Nathalie Morello, 'Un coupable peut en cacher une autre: Lutte "à mort" avec la mère dans trois romans de Lorette Nobécourt - *La Démangeaison*, *La Conversation* et *Horsita*', *Nottingham French Studies*, 43 (2004), 70-82.

²¹¹ Nathalie Morello, 'La culpabilité dans la fiction de Lorette Nobécourt', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 66 (2004), 89-99.

whilst going through bodily and identity perturbations is mediated alongside the exploration of the mechanics of writing such personal experience. To explore this point, I will rely extensively on Kathryn Robson's reading of the concept of 'écriture de peau' in *La Démangeaison*.²¹² Contemporary critics have explored the theme of the body in Nobécourt's texts, but the notion of monstrosity has not been touched upon. As I seek to demonstrate in this thesis – and in selected texts by Nobécourt in this chapter – the exploration of monstrous characters permits a unique investigation into the relations between the subject, his/her body and his/her social environment. This chapter focuses on the impact of illness (and consequential stigma on the body) on the personal development and search for identity of Irène, especially as the skin (the boundary) of the protagonist is symbolically rendered blurry by psoriasis. With the collapse of internal and external limits, the character crosses those of the proper and acceptable and becomes a subject of abjection and a monster. However, I explore the possibility of reconciliation between the self and its other/internal entity, and interrogate whether Nobécourt's monstrous bodies offer new ways of looking at the monstrous body.

In Part Two of this chapter, I explore the subject's encounter with her Other, the other part of the self, through the examination of the skin as a movable frontier, especially as Nobécourt proposes in her texts a vision of the body as container (a sealed entity or one to be opened up). The discovery of this presence within perturbs the subject's sense of self; it will involve a questioning of possible ways (envisaged by the character and her entourage) to control this internal presence and the visibly different subject. Part Three consists of an exploration of the character's hybridity and monstrosity, utilising Kristeva's theories of abjection in order to analyse her precarious position in relation to this invading presence in her body. Finally, Part Four is dedicated to the exploration of the possibilities of reconciliation with the Other through the written testimonial of individual hybridity and difference, and within the subject's personal/social context in Nobécourt's writing. The discussion will then lead me to interrogate the notion of "recovery" of the monstrous subject within our contemporary society.

3.2 Encounters with the other part of the self

²¹² Kathryn Robson, "L'écriture de peau": The Body as Witness in Lorette Nobécourt's *La Démangeaison*, *Nottingham French Studies*, 45 (2006), 66-77.

La Démangeaison narrates the life of Irène whose story seems to be solely focused on her body, more particularly the body as it is rendered (visually) improper because of psoriasis, Irène's lifelong skin condition. As I will discuss, in this text as well as in *L'Equarrissage*, psoriasis triggers introspection for the affected subject. The narrator in *La Démangeaison*, Irène describes her illness as a progressive invasion of her body, firstly from the outside (on her skin), and then in the inside of her body (even if psoriasis is technically already present in the body). The question that underpins my analysis is whether Irène's feeling of possession is a straightforward consequence of her psoriasis, or if it lies in her own (and others') response to the illness. The character, who experiences (social) rejection within her family context and later self-rejection, begins to turn inwards on herself²¹³ and encounters the other part of her self, the Other within which disrupts her notion of self and gradually causes her to become monstrous. In *La Démangeaison*, Irène recounts the body malaise and various sufferings caused by her skin condition; psoriasis becomes her lifelong partner, and could thus be seen as another "character" in the novel. For this reason I have judged it necessary to investigate the origins and the causes of the illness, turning briefly to medical and scientific explanations.²¹⁴

Psoriasis, an autoimmune disease, is caused by a malfunctioning immune system that sends out faulty messages, turning the body into its own enemy. As the immune system is (mistakenly) triggered, the body responds by creating superfluous skin cells at a much faster rate than a normal healthy body would.²¹⁵ White patches, lesions, or plaques appear on the skin; they are the extra layers of skin that have grown, but are not shed by the body. This extra layer of skin can be seen as a supplementary screen, a protective barrier of the inside from the outside, or the outside from the inside, out of which the monstrosity of the character develops. In other words, this living, moving frontier (the skin) is not a fixed separation but one that can thicken to diminish its permeability. Its ability to demarcate and shift limits, as I analyse later, resonates with the evocation of the monstrous: indeed, the monstrous points to the unreliability of "known" fixed limits (here, the skin), and invites a reconsideration of their supposed

²¹³ A movement outward the body is later found when the Other within symbolically takes dominion over Irène's body, and causes her to exteriorise her own (internal) violence on herself, and on others.

²¹⁴ Information on psoriasis, its causes and origins have been found on the National Psoriasis Foundation website <<http://www.psoriasis.org>> [accessed 15th January 2015].

²¹⁵ Instead of protecting the body, the dysfunctional immune system opens the body to interior and exterior aggression. I suggest that as the body therefore becomes its own aggressor, it perturbs the subject's ability to identify the causes of her aggression (illness).

inflexibility (deployed here via the subject's introspection). However, one of the issues that I will attempt to resolve first will be to decipher the (metaphorical) role of this superfluous skin; does it protect the body from external aggressors? Or is it a stronger container of what lies inside the body?

3.2.1 The skin as point of contact, (mis)communication and opposition with others

In *La Démangeaison* the skin of the main character can be analysed in different ways; it can be seen as a crime scene (bearing traces of fighting and violence), and as a stage. Just like the Nothombian dancer in Chapter 2, Irène seems to be caught in a network of gazes: all the focus (especially Irène's) is on her body, and her body becomes the site where her story is traced. Her skin is therefore a means by which we may decipher her behaviour. While Irène is aged only six months, the appearance of the skin condition is first described as 'un psoriasis monumental, preuve de mon infamie et de ma différence, la gale en un mot' (16). Instantly the young girl is categorised as different. The skin is the first platform of communication with others in so far it bears the traces of personal history and identity. Those can be simple sunburns or birth marks; they can be scars, bruises or traces of wounds that may bear witness of accidents or bodily violence; they can also be plaques and lesions caused by a skin condition such as psoriasis. In the latter case, these visual alterations of the skin speak of the inherent difference of the person who bears them; a possible social response to these visual markers of difference may be, as is the case in Irène's story, the classification of this individual as an outcast, an "other". Irène's psoriasis can be detected on her skin and it is a "proof" of the horror of her own person and condition. The skin thus represents the first frontier (obstacle) and opposition with others; it is that which determines the end of the self, the "me", and the beginning of the "not me", of others. Furthermore the skin could also be understood as a platform for communication in terms of contact with others. At the onset of a lifelong skin condition Irène depicts herself as despicable and different (16) and both these aspects are represented on her skin thanks to the lesions formed by psoriasis. However, if the skin initiates the dynamics of our rapport with others, it can nonetheless be posited as an unreliable source of superficial knowledge, opposed to what can be known or experienced through the body. As I show later, the skin can therefore impede self-introspection since it risks being misread by the subject and by others. In her article which analyses the workings of an 'écriture de peau' in *La Démangeaison*, Robson quotes Peggy Phelan who herself evokes the superficiality of the skin. She comments,

‘[it] lacks the depth, the interiority, we want it to give us’.²¹⁶ Robson continues, ‘Her choice of terms here is telling: what do we invest in our belief that the skin can somehow offer some kind of access to or reflection of a self, that the surface can offer proof of the depth?’.²¹⁷ As mentioned earlier, a possible social response to visible difference may be the rejection of the subject; Irène’s skin may be (mis)read as indicating the inherent vileness of the character. However, the diseased skin can also be interpreted as an indicator of a malaise within. Therefore, if Irène’s damaged skin points to a damaged inside, if it may be understood as the visual proof of other internal pains, this potentially involves another reading of the ‘maladie’ itself. Is it solely an “individual” malaise – that of a sufferer from a specific medical condition – or, as I would suggest, could this ‘maladie’ be the subject’s response to the social rejection she undergoes? As Jackie Stacey writes in *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, ‘The skin is overburdened. It represents the interface between inside and outside and is *the body’s ambassador*: it meets the world’.²¹⁸ As the ‘body’s ambassador’ the skin may indicate the torments inside the body, but in the case of psoriasis, internal difference is inscribed on the skin and also enacted through multiple gestures which testify to others of the subject’s (visual, behavioural and ultimately identity) difference. I argue that it gives away the unruly presence of an Other within, positing the subject as hybrid and monstrous.

Nobécourt’s protagonist is the victim of uncontrollable skin rashes caused by psoriasis. Robson writes that,

This compulsive scratching, on its simplest level, constitutes a response to the itch generated by her skin diseases, offering temporary relief and release. It also, however, represents the narrator’s urgent need to communicate and to transmit what she cannot articulate, that which remains locked inside her skin and which she cannot externalize thanks to the barrier of diseased skin that separates her from others.²¹⁹

In the case of Irène, the skin does not play the role of communication between/from Irène and/to others. Rather it seems to be one-way in so far as it indicates to others that she is different, even repulsive, and this does not resolve (but worsens) the lack of dialogue between Irène and her surroundings. Moreover, it could be understood that by

²¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 41.

²¹⁷ Robson, “‘L’écriture de peau’”, p. 76.

²¹⁸ Stacey, *Teratologies*, p. 84, my emphasis.

²¹⁹ Robson, “‘L’écriture de peau’”, p. 71.

scratching her skin – by removing the diseased skin – she attempts to eradicate what prevents her contact with others (on the physical level of contact, and that of oral communication). The monstrous will emerge within this damaged body, out of a feeling of claustrophobia and of the isolation/rejection from others. As Robson argues above, it is by compulsively scratching herself that she manifests her need to communicate her malaise. Irène (unsuccessfully) peels off her unhealthy skin to create a new rapport with others and encourage a new perception from the outside. Simultaneously she expresses her lack of care and contact with her parents by “caressing herself”, that is to say by incessantly and violently scratching her skin; we read:

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. Et ce manque à gagner, cette chose à devenir folle, oui on peut devenir folle pour cela, je le sentais dans ma rage à me caresser moi-même, c’est-à-dire à me gratter jusqu’au sang. (20-21)

The removal of the damaged skin by scratching is initially the attempt to take down the obstacles to mutual/reciprocal contact, communication and love with others. It is also an early attempt by the young girl to overcome other limits: her rebellion against the limits which dictate the rules of physical propriety is played out via her own challenge of the boundaries imposed by her body and illness. In so doing she has started to go literally beyond the limits of her body, peeling off what I would call her “skin-armour”.²²⁰ Moreover, the skin as container is a concept developed in Nobécourt’s *L’Equarrissage* in which she writes about ‘la peau, le bel organe de neuf mètres sur deux et qui contient le tout. Essayer de déchiffrer la peau, voilà toute l’affaire: l’écharner couche après couche pour découvrir autre chose que les os’ (36). This divulges a turn in the character’s perception of her own (diseased) skin, beyond a point of contact, (mis)communication and opposition with others. Indeed, she begins to envisage the unwrapping of her own body as a way to discover the mysteries of her flesh. I will demonstrate in the following sections that by scratching beyond the surface of her skin, the subject will metaphorically transcend multiple limits and become monstrous, she will challenge her personal as well as social perceptions of her visible difference, and attempt to decipher her own identity.

²²⁰ This “skin-armour” refers to the extra layers of skin that psoriasis produces. It can be understood as a claustrophobic body-sized cage which, because of its hideous appearance deprives Irène of love and care; and it could also be seen as protection from outside aggressions simultaneously caused by this repulsive-looking armour. In any case, it is thanks to this skin-armour and its negative consequences on Irène’s surroundings that the young girl starts looking *beyond* her own skin problems and *underneath* her own skin.

3.2.2 *Locating the Other to control (the manifestations of) difference*

Nobécourt hints at a double presence in the body, and the idea of a double within, whose difficulty to fully contain may also point to the fragility of the boundaries of the subject. Indeed as Stacey reminds us,

the body has been understood to be constituted within and through a system of boundaries which are integral to wider beliefs about defilement and purification. The boundaries of the body are invested with feelings of danger and thus passage across them is repeatedly and scrupulously monitored and regulated. The “jettisoned objects” from the body’s interior are expelled to the other side of those boundaries, to the margins, and it is this marginality which remains crucial to the regulation of certain bodily states.²²¹

In the case of Irène, psoriasis manifests itself on her border, her skin; it cannot be hidden, and it goes beyond the limits of her body, but still remains an inherent part of it. In a similarly uncontrolled way blood gushes out of Irène’s scratched wounds and surpasses the limits of the body imposed by our contemporary system of boundaries. Thus what should remain hidden inside the body overcomes the boundary of the skin and is revealed on the surface of the skin of the character. Furthermore the ‘jettisoned objects’ are not exactly expelled and distanced from the body as Irène’s blood and skin condition seem to be her new complexion. They transcend Irène’s limits and exhibit her difference and may remind of the monstrous which disrupts borders and embodies and warns (*monstrare, monere*²²²) about difference. From this permeable skin emanates the feeling of danger that Stacey mentions; the disgusting oozing on her skin testifies to unreliable and moving boundaries, it shows the possibility of overcoming the limits of the body, and by extension one’s fixed place in society. Eventually it threatens to disrupt the binary order of contemporary society. Moreover, beyond this notion of possibility, what my analysis aims to investigate is what is at stake when disrupting social codes and places. These feelings of threat and danger are accompanied by a fear of the unknown, of what lies inside of the body and which refuses to remain behind the barrier of the skin.

²²¹ Stacey, *Teratologies*, p. 75.

²²² Shildrick, p. 12.

This Other inside has to be identified in order to be controlled; by naming the Other, both Irène and the subject in *L'Equarrissage* seek to differentiate themselves from this presence within (it is inside me but it is not me). Irène names it 'la chose' (first mentioned page 18); similarly the young woman in *L'Equarrissage* refers to this internal possession as '[c]ette chose gonflée' (23). Indeed despite the process of distancing oneself from this Other (because it is solely a parasite and not yet recognised as forming part of the self), naming it nonetheless works towards the individuation of the Other.

Furthermore it becomes necessary to locate the Other, despite already knowing that it is somewhere under one's skin. Irène's malfunctioning immune system results in the creation of extra layers of skin: the problem is visible on the surface of the skin. However for her family it is inside the body as their daughter is taken to the psychiatrist: 'C'est la tête endommagée qu'il faut comprendre' (25), advises the doctor. Facing the results of her IQ test, the narrator of the story (ironically?) concludes: 'Mon QI dépasse les prévisions. C'est une faute, c'est une preuve, une confirmation de l'infirmité, de la différence, de la maladie qui grouille sous les cheveux.' (25-26). Whether above or below expectations, it is Irène's "abnormality" that disturbs the ability to issue a (medical) judgement. But at the age of four she is already pretending and knows that something else is going on under her skin. She testifies: 'Dès le début, oui, à trois ans, à quatre ans, dès le début il me faut ne rien dire de tout ce qui se trame' (24), and continues, 'Je fais semblant. A quatre ans. Ils m'ont appris à faire semblant au deuxième jour.' (25). Indeed what Irène seeks is '[u]n sursis peut-être pour continuer, atteindre l'âge de la parole, pouvoir enfin avouer' (25), and she concludes with '[u]n sursis avant la peine capitale. Je gagne du temps. J'emporte avec moi, sous mon bras, le verdict de la police médicale: *La nature du psoriasis demeure inconnue jusqu'à aujourd'hui*. [...] Ah! je les ai bien eus [...] Mais pour combien de temps?' (26).

It could be argued that the necessity to control her (health) is imposed via the disciplinary approach to her illness. The varied manifestations of psoriasis are named, located, and a cause must be identified: Irène is under the vigilance of the 'police médicale', perpetuated at home by her family. Within this disciplinary context, the child learns to hide (contain within) her malaise and bypass the rules. Like Plectrude at the Opera School, Irène's life is dependent on her ability to perpetuate a *mise en scène*; she is forced to conceal her interior perturbations and prevent their appearance on her body. However unknown the nature of psoriasis is for the young child, she is described as

already knowing, feeling in her body, that it is not purely psychological; she is able to fool the adults and keep secret what torments her body from the inside.

This early episode in the story already also invites a more complex understanding of Irène's psoriasis: for some characters, it seems to be located under her skin (in her brain), while for others it is assimilated to a skin condition (with visible lesions). However, the child who expresses the need to manipulate others' perception/understanding of her condition is furthermore displaying a reaction to their own relation with her difference. It could be suggested that Irène's torments lie somewhere at the intersection between dermatological condition, psychological problems, and her response to others' inability to come to terms with her difference. Irène's last interrogation cited above ('Ah ! je les ai bien eus [...] Mais pour combien de temps?' (26)) shows the early signs of fear about maintaining the ability to keep her secrets from others: how and when will it come out?

This need to find the location of the Other could also be seen as a means to surround the enemy within. For the young protagonist of *La Démangeaison* the danger is situated outside of her body: it is represented by her parents and family, "them", as she testifies from the first page of the novel: 'On ne s'étonnera pas alors qu'ils aient voulu me supprimer' (11). She puts the guilt of her own condition on them and says '*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*' (11). She accuses them of rejecting her ('*Ils m'ont poussée*'), of showing her the door (represented here by 'les fenêtres') and of leading her to places where she would be killed (suicide by defenestration, drowning in rivers, and being run over by a car like an abandoned stray dog or cat; these are the possible understandings of Irène's own expression of feelings of rejection). Finally she accused them of causing her psoriasis. Together with these she also accuses them of plotting for her death in set-up (car) accidents to which she refers as '*l'accident opportun qui me ferait disparaître définitivement.*' On the other hand for Irène's parents the problem is unmistakably situated inside, in the brain ('*C'est le cerveau qui est atteint...*' (32)), as they attempt from an early age to solve the problem with regular sessions at the psychiatrist (24-26). Despite the opposing views on the location of the enemy and problem, the body is expected to function as a container: whether inside or outside of the body, the threat must not be allowed to cross its boundary.

3.3 Configuring identity through hybridity and monstrosity

For the character in *La Démangeaison*, the early sensation of this Other inside herself evolves into a growing presence within, which challenges the subject's notion of her identity, and leads to the creation of a monstrous body. This second part seeks to understand the nature and role of this entity within the body, to inquire to what extent is it bound to the self, and to raise issues of domination, control and finally abjection.

3.3.1 *The monstrous/hybrid: from rejection towards incorporation*

In the Introduction to this thesis, I have explored how the alignment between the monstrous and otherness often translates an (impossible) attempt to secure difference outside the boundaries of the subject and safeguard his/her "normality". Essentially, they function as the Other against which normality can be verified.²²³ Indeed, when Irène's skin shows signs of fragility and even rupture, it is the whole integrity of the human subject, and by extension social order, that becomes affected by the collapse of "known" or "established" boundaries.

La Démangeaison pictures one monstrous figure clearly situated outside, as "not me":

Difforme elle était, cette femme d'à peine trente ans, et qui en paraissait plus de quarante, d'une difformité inquiétante, celle qui, dès la naissance de ma petite soeur, vint aider ma mère à s'occuper des enfants. Ses jambes minuscules portaient un tronc ridiculement grand, tronc qui, malgré cette taille démesurée, avait la largeur d'un adolescent frêle, sur lequel s'ajustait une paire de seins énormes. (27)

The monstrosity of Irène's nanny arises from her physical deformation, because of her ugliness and size, and also as it touches upon the concept of extraordinary, unnatural embodiment.²²⁴ Her deformity is such that it alters perception; it disrupts others' ability to produce physical assessments and as such it affects the outside (it is a chaotic element within the environment). It puzzles the reader (and the young protagonist) about her real age, and creates a feeling of worry (and compassion?) in front of the gathering on one body of so many elements gone wrong. Furthermore, Irène recognises herself in this mass of deformity: 'Je voyais dans la particularité de ce personnage engagé par mon

²²³ Stacey, *Teratologies*, p. 93.

²²⁴ See the Introduction of the thesis for more extensive definitions of the monstrous, and their subsequent references to specific theorisations.

père ... le reflet de ma propre monstruosité' (27-28). It is possible to advance here that the father's choice is not coincidental. The monstrous-looking nanny in whom Irène comes to see her own reflection may be an instance of *showing* the monster (from the Latin root *monstrare*) so that the young girl would discover another creature she resembles, and experience herself the effects that her appearance produces on others. The identification with the monstrous essentially effects separation within the subject and with the environment.²²⁵

The family employee shows an instance of monstrosity due to physical deformation, and perhaps excess (in the size of her breasts maybe), but not one of hybridity because, contrary to Irène, the nanny does not display in the description quoted above any level of mixture with another (non-human) species. Nobécourt resorts to powerful metaphorical transformations and possession by a 'plante-animal' in *La Démangeaison* (48) so as to denounce the excessive stress put on normalisation through the imposition of standards of visible corporeal propriety (which psoriasis disrupts). The author shows via creative literary imagery the potential damages inflicted on visibly unfit/unhealthy individuals. Irène remains fully human when she evokes the plant-animal (48) which possesses and terrorises her, and ultimately makes her monstrous.²²⁶ Similarly in *L'Equarrissage* the protagonist fears and rejects the vegetal possession of her body (23-24).²²⁷ These characters are monstrous hybrids, between humanity and animality, possessed by another alien, non-human creature. This brings me back again to the Introduction of the thesis and the discussion of Curti's *Female stories, female bodies* in which she writes that these creatures 'have been creeping into women's narratives'.²²⁸ The monstrous has indeed found a way into Nobécourt's texts and affected her characters.

In *La Démangeaison* Irène describes the presence inside her body as a creeping plant, ivy, 'mon lichen' (22) which demonstrates a step towards the assimilation of this parasite-entity after its simple denomination as 'la chose' (18). However as she starts

²²⁵ In Chapter 5, I return to the notion of identification with monstrous shapes but on the contrary I explore how they may serve as a point of non-identification for the "normal" individual who rejects the threat and the uncertainty embodied by the monstrous figure.

²²⁶ As Shildrick indicates, 'I want to stress from the outset that the "reality" of the various forms [of monsters] is not at issue [... and] what concerns me is that monsters operate primarily in the imaginary.' Shildrick, p. 9.

²²⁷ The issue of plant and animal possession will be further developed at a later stage in this part of the chapter.

²²⁸ Curti, p. 107.

investigating her flesh Irène is soon faced with the difficulty of determining the frontier between the entity inside, and her own self. Indeed, as Grosz argues, ‘it is a horror at the possibility of our own imperfect duplication, a horror of submersion in an alien otherness, an incorporation in and by an other’.²²⁹ And as Shildrick adds, ‘It is not that the monster represents the threat *of* difference, but that it threatens to interrupt difference – at least in its binary form – such that the comfortable otherness that secures the selfsame is lost’.²³⁰ Shildrick concludes that,

Monsters, then, are deeply disturbing; neither good nor evil, inside nor outside, not self or other. On the contrary, they are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject.²³¹

This brings forth the issue of possession from within: the integrity of the self is threatened by the internal presence which is troubling because it lives inside the body without being fully me, and challenging because the subject is forced to reconsider the concepts of the self, Other, and metamorphosis. As I go on to show next, the limits of the human subject are particularly challenged when the source of threat comes from within; indeed Shildrick’s interruption of difference culminates when the body acts against the safety of its own limits.

3.3.2 Hybridity and psoriasis: triggers to self-introspection

In the previous section, I showed that Irène’s hybridity is related to her psoriasis, which she experiences as an invasion from within by a plant-animal; this (metaphorical) mixture between the human subject and another (non-human) species makes her hybrid. However, there are other signs of the subject’s experience of her own hybridity, earlier in her story, before she began to imagine it and articulate it as a plant-animal invasion inside her body. The first words of *La Démangeaison* point to Irène’s hybridity, ‘Et voilà, je suis née paralysée. A demi. Pour moitié’ (11). She is born handicapped so already different from the rest of her family; she is ‘l’enfant témoin née la nuit dans le drame de la difformité terrorisante’ (12). This signals the role of Irène: she actualises difference; she makes difference possible by physically embodying it. Moreover, she is a living proof of the internal divide of the self, as she experiences and embodies

²²⁹ Grosz, ‘Freaks’, p. 36.

²³⁰ Shildrick, p. 45.

²³¹ Shildrick, p. 4.

hybridity. In the Preface of Ovid's *Métamorphoses* Jean-Pierre Néraudau writes that 'Certaines métamorphoses, décrites longuement, comme s'il était possible de donner à voir l'inconcevable et de justifier l'indescriptible, sont profondément troublantes, parce que soudain leur monstruosité semble possible'.²³² Irène's deformity is the exteriorisation/exposition of monstrosity; moreover the presence of an Other inside is corroborated by her semi-paralysis. Indeed she controls half of her body; so who possesses the other half? As Shildrick indicates,

If the monstrous is indeed half us, half something else, then the encounter with the monster need not mark the place of external hazard, but rather the interruption of the dead-end of full presence, and the emergence of the imaginative *and* embodied complications within. As a move that speaks inevitably to the imperative to reformulate the relations of self and other, it is irreducibly an ethical project.²³³

Irène recovers the full control of her body as the paralysis due to complications at birth disappears – 'C'est la médecine qui a omis de me retourner comme il faut' (11). The Other within (initially identified via her semi-paralysis), although no longer visible thanks to paralysis, seems to have found its way back into the body, where it remains dormant until the appearance of the skin condition. Psoriasis 'embodi[es] [the] complications within', and reveals the presence of the Other through 'imaginative' embodiments of this Other (as a plant-animal in the case of Irène).

Through the mishaps of her body the character of the novel becomes aware of the complexity of her identity. Quite literally speaking, Irène opens her body as one would unwrap a sweet, a present, or anything hidden from sight but that promises to be worth it: she peels off her skin and with it the extra layers that her deficient immune system has mistakenly created. As we read in *L'Equarrissage*,

Les baquets de mes entrailles m'ont révélé la vie, la nourriture de ma vie ne pouvait se trouver que par l'exécution de ma mise à mort. Oui j'ai été *équarrie* car il est vrai qu'on ne se nourrit pas des bêtes qui meurent d'elles-mêmes [...] Je n'ai rien caché de ma mise à mort pour en donner le fruit, j'ai été immobilisée, suspendue, saignée, dépouillée, éviscérée, fendue en deux verticalement (47)

The subject gains access to knowledge and understanding about life ('révél[er] la vie') through the study of her flesh and through symbolic death (the 'exécution de [sa] mise à

²³² Jean-Pierre Néraudau, 'Préface' to Ovid's *Métamorphoses*, ed. by Jean Pierre Néraudau, trans. Georges Lafaye (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1992), p. 13.

²³³ Shildrick, p. 47.

mort'), which could be a metaphorical adjustment of the place of the self in relation to the Other within. Similarly Curti indicates that:

the search for identity [...] can be expressed through bodily transmutation, a stubbornly researched metamorphosis of the beautiful into the monstrous, and vice versa. A transformed, altered body develops out of the fragmentary subject of modernity.²³⁴

Irène's 'search for identity [...] is] expressed through bodily transmutation' which will lead to the acknowledgement of the place of the self and the Other, eventually resulting in a metamorphosis of the subject.

In her texts, Nobécourt uses psoriasis as a device to initiate the personal enquiry of body understanding that would lead to the deciphering of the self. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* Kristeva theorises the presence of the Other ('l'Autre') as enabling the very act of being. She writes about '[cet] Autre qui me précède et me possède, et par cette possession me fait être. Possession antérieure à mon avènement'.²³⁵ Similarly in the case of Irène the discovery of the other part of her self permits the discovery of the full self; it is 'the interruption of the dead-end of full presence'.²³⁶ For Kristeva, and corroborating my hypothesis of psoriasis and the Other as "belonging" to/with the self, the possession is 'antérieure à mon avènement'. This anteriority could symbolise birth, or a rebirth, maybe a liberation of the subject (which I evoke towards the end of this chapter). Furthermore, just as I have advanced that the monstrous is part of human identity, this '[p]ossession antérieure à mon avènement' could also point to a trait of human identity that goes beyond the individual subject (Nobécourt's character) and that encompasses all human beings.

3.3.3 Uncontrollable internal invasions

For Irène, the discovery of her hybridity, and its evocation via her psoriasis, lead her to undertake a process of self-introspection and to investigate her Other within. Further than an encounter with this Other, I showed that issues of domination arise with this internal invader; in this section, I explore Irène's developing need to (re)cover a form of control over her body and the exteriorisation of her difference. Control is at stake from the beginning of Irène's story, firstly because she is born semi-paralysed (which means

²³⁴ Curti, pp. 94-95.

²³⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 18.

²³⁶ Shildrick, p. 47.

that the other half of the body remains under the dominion of an unknown entity). Then as the handicap disappears, her difference transforms into an internal Other. Irène attempts an explanation for her difference in order to rationalise it (to position herself in relation to her internal Other) and eventually in the hope to regain control over her body and her condition. However innocent she describes herself – ‘Je suis née sans psoriasis, sans haine. [...] Innocente, absolument’ (23) – she still seeks to determine the crime that condemned her to lifelong suffering. If psoriasis is clearly defined as her punishment, the original fault remains undefined: ‘Car il me fallait dès lors payer ce crime inexpiable – je le cherchais, je l’inventais’; she is ‘coupable dès le début’ (21).

The narrative of the life of Irène is punctuated by descriptions of scratching sessions and their resulting pain, which testify to a complete lack of control of the situation. We read of the unbearable soreness and distress of the young girl: ‘Je me suis grattée absolument, et je peux affirmer ici que celui qui n’a pas connu la démangeaison ininterrompue sait bien peu de l’enfer’ (16). She speaks of ‘nuit[s] massacrant[e]s’, of ‘picotement[s] frénétique[s]’, of the invasion by ‘ce prurit immonde’, and finally ‘cette lutte à mort’ (16-18).

Together with inhuman pain she is the victim of the incessant feeling of invasion by insects under her skin. ‘Le pied gauche ou droit fourmillant de piqûres’, ‘des quantités d’insectes indéfinissables, qui gigotaient dans ma chair, à l’intérieur’, ‘un picotement frénétique’, and finally, ‘un goût étrange, sorte de saveur de la mort s’il en est une, ou de l’angoisse, un goût de chiures d’araignées écrasées m’emplissait la bouche sans vouloir s’en défaire’ (17) are only a handful of instances amongst the numerous samples and testimonies of pain which compose Irène’s story. Irène is overwhelmed by her psoriasis – ‘La chose me grattait [...] Mon psoriasis, j’en avais plein la bouche’ (18) – and the itch is pictured not only as an evil possession of her body by insects, but also, as I explained before, by an animal-plant. The following description of internal invasion reveals that the subject in *La Démangeaison* is losing control,

Je sentais en moi comme une fleur venimeuse, bête vénéneuse... J’enrichissais peu à peu mon vocabulaire. C’était une sorte d’animal-orchidée qui m’étouffait... Ma plante-animal se développait autour de l’oesophage, je suffoquais parfois gentiment. Il me semblait que peu à peu cette présence grandissait, me rongerait de l’intérieur et que les

manifestations, elles, en étaient externes. Mon crâne chevelu se couvrait de plaques, ma peau s'effritait.²³⁷ (47-48)

The use of 'fleur venimeuse' and 'bête vénéneuse' denotes the inherent vileness of the possession described as utterly dangerous because containing poison, and threatening as it produces venom. It is also stifling ('je suffoquais'); it devours the body from within ('me rongeaient de l'intérieur') and Irène disappears as the parasite is made stronger. Her body dries out: 'la fleur-animal qui gobait toute l'humidité de mon corps (49) resulting in 'ce corps sec à en crever' (49); finally 'ma peau s'effritait' (47-48) indicates the collapse of the boundaries between self/other and inside/outside, as well as the imminent coming out (exorcism?) of the beast within. Similarly in *L'Equarrissage* the protagonist is destabilised by the presence of a life-threatening animal possession: 'Un crapaud dans la bouche m'empêchait d'aspirer l'oxygène' (21). Neither protagonists are in control of their bodies and Irène recounts 'cette démangeaison bouleversante; bouleversante parce qu'impossible à maîtriser, bouleversante parce que présence étrangère qui se jouait de moi selon son bon vouloir, dans un va-et-vient décidé par elle' (18-19), and speaks of 'cette lutte dont l'issue m'était inévitablement fatale' (18). Irène is eventually the powerless witness of the bodily changes and monstrous metamorphoses caused by psoriasis: 'Alors je regardais affolée mon ventre qui se couvrait de plaques blanches' (19).

As domination of the body is at stake, its frontiers are made unclear. The Other no longer appears as antithetical; it merges uncomfortably with the "me", also threatening the definition of what opposed the "me", to the point of abjection, when it becomes necessary to (attempt to) fully reject this Other. In a nutshell, Irène seems to have lost control over her invading internal Other. Consequently, the perturbations of her internal (boundaries) translate into an unclear sense of self and invoke abjection, and ultimately announce problematic interactions with the outside world. In the next section, I explore how the tensions between Irène and her own body transmute into unhealthy, even violent, relationships with her spatial environment and her entourage. Ultimately, her family's inappropriate response to Irène's bodily and identity

²³⁷ Interestingly, Nothomb also pictures Plectrude "filling herself up" with words and vocabulary from the dictionary to describe what devours her (the rats/teachers at the Opera School). It would seem that with *Robert* and *La Démangeaison*, the mastering of language and terminology works to control the object it describes. This could also represent an early sign of a subject faced with abjection, 'égaré' and 'Constructeur de territoires, de langues, d'oeuvres' in an attempt to 'délimiter son univers'. (Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 15-16, to whom I return later in this chapter).

perturbations will unveil society's own difficulty to accept visible difference and its attempt to exclude these monstrous subjects from societal modes of existence.

3.3.4 *Expressions of isolation (of the subject) to contain monstrosity*

The feelings of isolation (bordering on claustrophobia) which emanate from the fight for survival and domination between Irène and her invading internal presence reappear in Irène's relation with her family. The young girl is a stranger in her own family home; she despises their apparent benevolence (19) and hypocrisy (20), and she deplors her condition (20). In a nutshell, she expresses how much she would have liked life without the illness, this constant reminder of her medical and social condition. She wishes for the end of the Other inside that creates a split within, and a separation with others/the outside world: 'A tout moment, je me suis sentie en quarantaine' (39). As her psoriasis progresses, Irène comments, 'Petit à petit, je suis devenue ma maladie' (39), just as anorexia provokes in Plectrude a comparable sensation of becoming her body and its pains. Despite the differences between anorexia and psoriasis, in both cases the illnesses "take over" the body and personal space of the affected subject. Consequently, the unsustainable alterations to the (sense of) self caused by the medical condition point to a (monstrous) subject who will struggle to entertain a healthy rapport with her body and to interact socially with others. Indeed, Irène is estranged from her family; visually speaking, she does not belong to their kind anymore. Her illness displays the proofs of difference; she confesses feeling 'exposée aux autres' (39), which does not sound so unlike "opposée aux autres". As I proposed before, she is indeed the monster who shows (*monstrare*) and warns (*monere*)²³⁸ of her difference. Corroborating Irène's initial feeling of isolation, she is thus physically (visually), geographically and affectively distanced from her entourage: 'Il fut question de m'éloigner de la ville *afin de m'effacer* dans les kilomètres de distance' (41, my emphasis).

Expressions of isolation of the monstrous subject appear between Irène and her family, and also differently between the (monstrous) body and the outside. In her texts, Nobécourt explores the notion of the body as container, and as keeper of the undesirable (the abject), or anything that could endanger the subject's proper place in her social context. When young Irène at the psychiatrist's wants to fool the adults who diagnose a

²³⁸ Shildrick, p. 12.

psychological problem (24-26), and when her family turns a blind eye to her serious skin condition (qualified as ‘quelques allergies étranges, disgracieuses’ (20)), both Irène and her family differently re-enact society’s difficulty to tolerate bodily difference and the desire to isolate expressions of visible impropriety.

On another level Irène’s bedroom also functions as a container of the young girl (this monstrosity) who sees in the windows not only an opening but also a drastic way out of her condition. We read,

je vis surgir des petits papillons sur les vitres de ma chambre qui m’indiquaient de prendre garde au vide qui se trouvait là, en un mot qui me rappelaient à chaque instant, contre ma distraction légendaire, qu’il y avait là une possibilité de suicide immédiate et d’une efficacité exemplaire. Ces incessants appels au meurtre commencèrent de me perturber quelque peu si bien que je faillis passer à l’action, épuisée que j’étais par la lutte à mort. Mais au matin je tenais bon. [...] Cependant, la persistance de ces discrets messages scotchés sur les vitres de notre cinquième étage continuait de me harceler quotidiennement. (45-46)

Defenestration represents the exit of the physical space of the bedroom, but also more generally of her body and her fate. The shift from ‘suicide’ to the expression ‘incessants appels au meurtre’ indicates a change of perception. With the former the death of the character Irène is understood, while in the latter we sense the idea of murder and homicide of somebody separate from the self. Indeed jumping out of her bedroom window would entail the death of Irène and also the extermination of the beast that possesses her. It is also possible to interpret this extract as a forewarning of a later episode, when the monstrous subject has left the security of the parental home (functionally an institutional space), and becomes a danger to herself and to others. However, she resists the temptation and decides instead to metaphorically reinforce the external walls that contain her, and by extension the Other inside her body – ‘je pris la décision de choisir un pensionnat et de m’y enfermer pour ce qu’il me restait d’années à étudier’ (46). Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* writes of the relationship between the subject in search of their identity and the notion of loss of spatial references:

Au lieu de s’interroger sur son “être”, il [‘Celui par lequel l’abject existe [... le] jeté’] s’interroge sur sa place: “Où suis-je?” plutôt que “Qui suis-je?”. Car l’espace qui préoccupe le jeté, l’exclu, n’est jamais *un*, ni *homogène*, ni *totalisable*, mais essentiellement divisible, pliable, catastrophique. Constructeur de territoires, de langues, d’oeuvres, le *jeté* n’arrête pas de délimiter son univers dont les confins fluides [...] remettent constamment en cause sa solidité et le poussent à recommencer. Bâtitteur infatigable, le jeté est en somme un *égaré*.²³⁹

²³⁹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 15-16 (italics in the original text).

Indeed Irène simultaneously seeks to reject and to contain the other part of her self, which she does not yet integrate. She is stuck in ‘the dead-end of full presence’²⁴⁰ and aims at constricting this alien part to increasingly smaller and farther places (further from home, from herself). On her bus journey from school at the end of each week she passes ‘rien moins qu’un asile, un hôpital et une prison’ (55); she continues, ‘A chaque fois que je m’approchais de l’un ou l’autre de ces endroits, je sentais qu’il me faudrait une force extrême pour ne point me laisser aller à une quelconque faiblesse, qui me conduirait inévitablement dans l’un ou l’autre de ces trois endroits’ (56).²⁴¹ Given what Kristeva explains above, Irène’s space is considerably unreliable. ‘Bâtisseur[se] infatigable’, the young protagonist seeks in the ‘asile’, ‘hôpital’ or ‘prison’ a place of containment without knowing which would best suit her condition (corroborating my hypothesis of the undefined/unfound identity).²⁴² She is an ‘égaré[e]’ wandering in between spaces. For Irène, her psoriasis dictates the possibilities of her body – ‘j’étais retenue par des fils d’araignées déments’ (20) – limits contact with others, and causes her feelings of alienation. It is not psoriasis as a medical condition but as an object of people’s rejection that causes the skin condition to restrain Irène. The feeling of impotency is worsened by the impossibility of finding external help and comfort. Nobécourt writes in *L’Equarrissage* that ‘j’avais connu de graves problèmes de peau et j’étais moi aussi en dehors du monde’ (21); also, ‘Je ne pouvais plus m’occuper du monde, j’étais dans les entrailles de l’humain. Enfermée en moi-même je cherchais *la mort claire et interminable*’ (31).

These characters are locked in their bodies, and outside of the world of humans. Consequently they are regarded as freaks needing a strong hand of control such as it is described in *L’Equarrissage* :

Les circuits de mon corps se sont trouvés aliénés, séparés les uns des autres, les rendant comme fous, autonomes [...] mon corps désormais ne m’était plus d’aucun secours.

²⁴⁰ Shildrick, p. 47.

²⁴¹ Interestingly, these three ‘endroits’ are typical instances of Foucauldian disciplinary institutions. If the family functions as a disciplinary institution up to a certain point in Irène’s story, I will explore at the end of this chapter why the monstrous character cannot be envisaged as a social subject, and must return to the confinement of a fully-fledged disciplinary institution.

²⁴² Nobécourt also writes in *La Démangeaison* about an earlier mention of the mental asylum (a disciplinary institution which excludes “unfit” individuals from societal existence): ‘Au fil des ans, l’affection [psoriasis] s’est transformée sporadiquement en leucoplasie [...], me plaçant ainsi à l’écart, comme les fous’ (16).

[...] Pendant des années j'avais subi des piqûres toutes les semaines parce qu'il fallait rétablir les circuits que la nuit en moi avait défaits. Mes nuits n'étaient pas fraîches, elles étaient alors libres et dangereuses.' (29)

Regular medication may have a medical goal, but they are also the sedatives aiming at controlling this disrespectful creature (inside and outside of the body). Moreover Irène feels not only perpetually in quarantine (39) but she is also cruelly beaten until bloody by her own mother: 'Pouvais-je m'étonner également que l'on me cravachât des heures durant, ou ce qui me semblait comme tel'. Irène continues, 'Alors je dormais, le dos brûlant, et n'entendais pas même mon père, qui, à l'aube, prenait tranquillement l'instrument [la cravache] pour aller chatouiller les flancs de son cheval alezan qu'il ne manquait jamais de monter chaque matin' (30-31). The revolting scene of parental violence underlines the place of Irène in their eyes. Less than an animal, she is this undefined creature in between states and spaces prowling at night. The horse's sides are only 'chatouill[és]' by the whip, but Irène's back is flogged to the exhaustion of the strength and disgust of the mother.

Nobécourt's texts demonstrate society's harsh responses to subjects deemed monstrous because of visible impropriety. I showed that they are kept at distance (geographically and affectively) from others, and that it is necessary to contain the improper otherness inside the body, with medication or violence. The feeling of claustrophobia is enhanced when the Other is felt as an obstruction; the character of *L'Equarrissage* speaks of a toad inside her mouth preventing her from breathing (21), and Irène testifies to the invasion by psoriasis and the impossibility to speak. 'Au fil des ans, l'affection s'est transformée sporadiquement en leucoplasie qui m'a envahi la bouche, me plaçant ainsi à l'écart, comme les fous' (16). Despite being only aged six months and thus still unable to speak, the invasion of the condition inside her mouth could be metaphorically understood as a means to prevent her from speaking (or to impair/condemn her capacity of speech). Unable to speak, Irène cannot testify to the horror of her condition, which reinforces her feeling of isolation. Deprived of a typically human capacity, she is closer to an animal, to a hybrid monster. On another level, she is incapable of attaining the Symbolic order via speech, and of distancing herself from the world of abjection (pre-symbolic order).²⁴³

²⁴³ In Chapter 4, I explore the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship as it is represented by Louise L. Lambrichs in *A ton image*, and through the character of Elise. This character is similarly unable to speak and tied to the Semiotic. Linked with the maternal, it carries notions of indistinct links with between the mother and the child, as the latter needs to overcome this original abjection to reach individuation.

As well as an obstruction to the subject's ability to breathe or to speak, the invading internal presence takes over the body of the character. Irène refers to 'une force occulte, surnoise, mais qui m'envahissait toute entière' (55). In *L'Equarrissage*, the protagonist has lost the control of her body and even fears movement: the Other has overpowered the host body on a physiological and a psychological level (24). Irène's stifling animal-plant feeds on her bodily substances (49) and devours her from within (48). The beast inside dismantles the body – 'la maladie petit à petit mangeait mon visage' (49) – it eats her flesh and organs – 'un petit morceau de mon oreille qui fut englouti à jamais' (51) – and Irène is condemned to implosion and losing herself inside her own body. She becomes unable to see and to speak, without a voice (a view, a place); her face, ostensibly the indicator of her identity and the anchor to her place in the world, is destroyed and replaced by that of the monster: 'une sorte de face ronde et lunaire où se cotoyaient crevasses sèches et pus laiteux' (50). As Irène appears possessed from within and without by this uncontrollable Other, her rejection of the Other eventually transforms into self-rejection.

3.3.5 Psoriasis as self-rejection: a reading through the mechanics of abjection

I shall begin my analysis of psoriasis in terms of abjection with a quote by Curti: 'These female monstrous bodies can be multiple, gigantic, fragmented, sexually ambiguous, the product of artificial grafting and mechanistic (de)constructions, sometimes even of clumsy, old-fashioned surgery'.²⁴⁴ Nobécourt's characters are definitely recognisable in this description as they do not fit any mould or standard of normality. They are disturbing because they are unclassifiable. Following Kristeva's theorisation of abjection, psoriasis can be understood as producing the abject. Indeed 'Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte'.²⁴⁵ Irène's skin condition unveils the presence of an invading hidden entity inside the body; the limits between her self and her Other inside become increasingly blurred (48-50) and her personal order upset. It is terrifying because this entity within the body threatens the integrity of the self, made abject. As the limits between the "me" and the "not me" collapse and the Other within comes out, the subject loses his/her identity. This is one of the implications of the abject that Kristeva

²⁴⁴ Curti, p. 120.

²⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 12.

determines: ‘Il y a, dans l’abjection, une de ces violentes et obscures révoltes de l’être contre ce qui le menace et qui lui paraît venir d’un dehors ou d’un dedans exorbitant, jeté à côté du possible, du tolérable, du pensable’.²⁴⁶ Abjection and psoriasis are finally treacherous, even constantly in disguise.²⁴⁷

Within the environment of her up-bringing, Irène’s psoriasis can almost only produce for the character feelings of abjection; it is a context in which Irène appears as foreign in/to her own family, where she feels she does not belong and which thrusts upon her her own self-rejection. In the text Irène appears in-between species, a subspecies, treated worse than an animal (30-31) and inhabited by an animal-plant: ‘L’abject nous confronte [...] à ces états fragiles où l’homme erre dans les territoires de l’*animal*’.²⁴⁸ Irène is also the stranger in her family, receiving special treatments with unusual and unfamiliar ointments: ‘Car mes vêtements, ma nourriture, mes bains et mes crèmes furent multiples et autres’ (39). She continues, ‘A moi, il fallait des climats différents, des rites particuliers, une façon de vivre unique, de celles qui inquiètent par leur cérémonial douteux’ (39). Her family members, although willing to confer to the young girl the necessary medication (but not the non-material moral support), do not identify with her peculiar lifestyle requirements. Indeed, Irène’s ‘bains odieux’ with smelly ‘plantes venues d’ailleurs’ (39-40) and her almost unpronounceable treatments such as ‘l’huile [...] de chaulmoogra’ or ‘l’acide chrysophanique’ (40) seem as foreign as Irène does to her family. Indeed, she remains ‘l’étrangère’ (33). Firmly separated from her family, the possibility of reconnection between the self, Other and the body is impaired by the sharp (and not reconciliating) insertion of a family member or a nurse, for the care and medical daily duties of the girl. While these should be personal and private bodily chores, the introduction of a ‘third party’ reinforce the distance felt between Irène and her own body, as she is bathed and taken care of like a dependent incapable body.²⁴⁹ In spite of the multiple attempts to treat/cure the skin condition (read: to

²⁴⁶ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 9.

²⁴⁷ See also Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 12: ‘L’abjection, elle, est immorale, ténébreuse, louvoyante et louche: une terreur qui se dissimule, une haine qui sourit, une passion pour un corps lorsqu’elle le troque au lieu de l’embraser, un endetté qui vous vend, un ami qui vous poignarde...’

²⁴⁸ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 20.

²⁴⁹ In Chapter 5, I explore the dynamics of the disciplinary institution as they appear in the fictive representation of a retirement home in Régine Detambel’s fiction. I explore how the imposition of the precept of hygiene works to detach the aged subjects from their environment, performing a further detachment from the body especially as hygiene is performed by nurses on the subjects’ bodies.

control/annihilate her difference), at night, the monster awakens and Irène lets out ‘cris’, ‘sanglots’ and ‘rage’. The terrifying episodes of itch and fight belong to the night and the realm of the unconscious when the young girl, powerless and under the full dominion of the beast, is the victim of her own bodily violence. I note that she expresses one of them as ‘mes ongles griffaient ma peau dans mon inconscience’ (40), and not ‘je me griffais inconsciemment’ for example. Indeed ‘je’ is not the subject of the sentence as Irène loses the leadership of her actions; the beast, agent in control of the body and ‘[ses] ongles’, ‘malgré [elle]’, rips her body open.

Finally, I investigate how the character, who cannot live with (the social and bodily consequences of) her psoriasis, is led on the path towards suicide. Irène is turned inwards and locked in her body-cage (as a result of various and self-imposed confinements); she has undertaken the process of suicide. Indeed as Mehdi Belhaj Kacem writes relating to *L'Équarrissage*,

le suicide n'est pas la décision d'une intériorité coupée de tout et autiste, cette séparation voulue fait *déjà partie* du processus qui conduit au suicide. Le suicide est la conséquence d'un *rapport aux autres corps* ; quand celui-ci réfléchit dans le corps suicidaire si peu de valeur que cette valeur devient celle du corps même, qui va se suicider. [...] Disons plutôt que jamais une existence ne se suicide, c'est toujours une CO-EXISTENCE.²⁵⁰

In a nutshell, Irène's envisaged suicide is the result of a succession of failed attempts at finding in herself and others the sufficient acceptation and tolerance of her condition. She cannot overcome and reconcile with the inner split between her self and the Other (she is a 'co-existence'), she is lost in bodily introspection and invasion, and she sinks into the world of abjection. She becomes the embodiment of monstrosity; her suicide is committed as the 'rapport aux autres corps' is engulfed and annihilated by her own bodily submersion. The subject's metaphorical death translates her complete exile; the separation between self and others echoes that with humanity and society. She even experiences symbolic psychic (ontological) death as she has been overpowered by her internal Other.

In the final part of this chapter, I will investigate whether the subject who undertakes a personal search for reconciliation with the Other may reach a form of interior and self-

²⁵⁰ Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *L'Abandon somptuaire*, in *L'Équarrissage* by Lorette Nobécourt (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2001), pp. 55-61 (p. 58).

other harmony. I interrogate the possibility for the subject to successfully perform the personal bodily introspection whilst remaining a member of society. In the light of the analyses undertaken in this third part, I conclude that Nobécourt's portrayal of psoriasis in her texts suggests an opening to the body and to self-enquiry. The discovery and eventual accommodation of the self and Other may be reliant on the tolerance and understanding of the context, but it is above all else a matter of personal introspection, which will then result in an existence (and not a 'co-existence')²⁵¹ and thus the disappearance of (physical) monstrosity and feelings of abjection.

3.4 Questionable reconciliations: writing monstrosity with(in) society

Stacey writes that 'It is the crossing of the border between I/other and between inside and outside that truly disgusts; not death, then, but that which must be eradicated in order to live'.²⁵² In other terms, 'that which must be eradicated in order to live' represents the elements leading to suicide. What brings forth the latter (suicide), as I have explained in the previous part of this chapter, is the heterogeneous subject prone to a 'co-existence'.²⁵³ To live then, the subject must overcome this co-existence; he/she must re-evaluate the dynamics of the complex relationship with the Other, which in turns entails an understanding of the place and role of the abject. As Barbara Creed explains in *The Monstrous-Feminine*,

Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic.²⁵⁴

It is thus the achievement of a "controlled" form of reconciliation (by the subject) between the self and Other that permits the life of the (social) subject. Yet, reconciliation is not to be equated with assimilation: self-effacement in abjection cannot bring forth equilibrium as one entity overpowers the other. This introspection will therefore involve a level of interplay with the abject; as the subject begins her

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Stacey, *Teratologies*, p. 82. In Chapter 5, I return to the notion of disgust and explain how it can work as a protection for the subject who refuses to project him/herself in what threatens individual integrity (the abject).

²⁵³ Kacem, p. 58.

²⁵⁴ Creed, p. 9.

investigation into psoriasis, she has to temporarily transgress the (accepted, dermal) limits of the body and to envisage, beyond (physical) difference and via the monstrous, new ways of being in the body and with the Other (which eventually needs to be demarcated from the self to construct a social subject). In the section that follows, I explore in *La Démangeaison* and *L'Equarrissage* possible outcomes of this quest for reconciliation, new embodiments (possible rebirths?) and visions of being in the world.

3.4.1 Writing (with) rage (and failing) to expel difference

Through Irène's sickness (her individual experience of psoriasis and the response of those around her), Nobécourt portrays some of the 'dichotomies' evoked by Curti in her analysis of monstrous subjects.²⁵⁵ Psoriasis brings about the monstrous, and Nobécourt creates an in-between character who, as she compares her illness to an animal-vegetal possession, fluctuates between humanity, the animal realm and even the kingdom of *Plantae*. She represents one of Curti's 'hybrid shapes', on the border between the normal human body and that of the horrid beast. In her monstrous state, Irène is depicted rather as struggling to achieve this 'overcoming of [her own] dichotomies'. Indeed, she remains either divided inside her body and from her entourage or, as I will explore, overpowered by the Other within; Irène struggles to find a reconciliation between the different parts which compose her self. I will demonstrate in the following sections that her difficulties to first extirpate the terrible skin condition from her body and then to find ways to live with it, is set against a background fight for domination between self and Other, between the simultaneous desire to give in to her 'démangeaison' and to resist it, but ultimately strained by what constitutes the socially acceptable. Rather than an 'overcoming of dichotomies', Nobécourt's texts would thus seem to signal beyond binary oppositions and invite other ways of looking at bodily difference.

From an early age in the life of Irène, psoriasis allows her access to 'la conscience de [son] être' (32) as she confesses, 'Car dans ma difficulté à exister, j'allais bientôt acquérir grâce à ma maladie, la certitude d'être toujours différente' (32-33). At this point in the story, the subject's health condition only reveals her alienation – 'Folle, lépreuse, suicidaire, [...] l'étrangère' (33) – but later proposes a vision of psoriasis as a

²⁵⁵ Curti, p. 29.

trigger and a helper to the revelation and expression of the subject's hybridity, taking her to a closer grasp at her identity. The Other within the subject can be seen as an inherent, although somewhat hidden, part of the self, whose presence is "forced out" thanks to her illness (investigation). In each text, this (bodily) introspection is mediated via writing. The sick subject's coming to writing represents a desire to testify to this inherent "mal-être", to extirpate it from the body, to translate (transform?) it into something else and metaphorically get rid of it: 'Je voyais une à une les griffures s'effacer et devenir sur mon papier quadrillé, d'étranges et longues trainées d'encre noire' (66). Contrary to her disgraceful bodily changes (metamorphoses), Irène seems in control of this transmutation: 'La chair devenait verbe' (66). Internal bodily confusion is immediately discharged onto the page, and Irène's first blast lasts for a single breath of rage, in a three-page diatribe without pauses. Following Irène's initial amazement with written expression, she discovers that she can reinvent herself, that the power of language can offer an outlet for her internal suffering. She exclaims, '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!' (67). However, rage frames this investigation (and in language), and whilst Irène could have progressed to learning the tongue of her own body, she is similarly constrained, and in fact only able to vent her frenzy (of words). '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' (66). Former violence onto her body is simply redirected at words and onto the page – 'le papier contre la peau, en échange de la peau!...' (67-68) – highlighting the superficiality of this (diverted) investigation – 'A coups de conjonctions, mon psoriasis je le mettais par terre, je le piétinais...' (68-69). She immediately continues, 'enfin, enfin je traduisais le texte de ma peau...' (69). I would argue that this "translation" does not express the subject's own incorporation of her hybridity as a part of her identity, but merely reveals a denigration of her own difference, and the hopeless attempt to exterminate in a blow (of words) a life-long genetic condition. Her initiative is also in vain as she does not go deep enough – her skin acts here as a polymorphous limit – and remains focused on the ostensible signs of her difference, ironically re-enacting the same constricting mistaken perception of which she has always been victim.

Therefore, Irène's self-introspection shapes into self-exorcism, the written outpouring of her bodily violence; she seems to mistake this writing of her skin for a reading of her

internal difference and the subsequent (written) personal/unique expression of her hybrid identity. Similarly, as rage dominates her text, it detracts from the main aim for writing and blinds the subject to channel her energy (her rage) in the wrong direction. ‘Je conjuguais à mort. J’exterminais avec barbarismes l’exécration des miens!’ (69-70). Language is her weapon for expressing the anger against her family; she inquires into its limits and transgresses its rules (‘barbarismes’) to effect the total revenge (‘à mort’) against her family’s lack of love for her: ‘Et plus j’inscrivais sur mes pages d’écolière l’horreur des miens, plus ma peau retrouvait son élasticité première’ (66). However, the direct rapport between the quantified (surface) recovery on the one hand, and the outpouring of hatred for her kin on the other, could be read to foretell a violence directed at others, outside the family. She is granted a temporary means to voice her pain, and a short rest from her illness,

Et le temps est venu de la simplicité. 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, lorsqu’enfin le décor a pris le relief qui était le sien. (76)

Brutality accompanies this turning point – a new chapter “imposes itself” on Irène and in *La Démangeaison* – as well as the next one in the life of the character. Irène’s metamorphosis is short-lived but total and it transforms her knowledge of her body: ‘Je restais quelques mois la peau lisse, tendue sur mon squelette, offerte à la rue comme un fruit goûteux’ (77). Essentially, these bodily changes are an “inverted” monstrous transformation; they erupt as violently and uncontrollably on Irène’s body as those she had had to endure up to this stage. However “positive” or welcome this sudden metamorphosis may be, I argue that it highlights a sense of uncertainty and instability in the relationship between the subject and her body (image). Symbolically made available for consumption, her physical transformation allows her to (temporarily) forget her internal blurred boundaries, and again she (mistakenly) focuses instead on exteriority. She opens herself to the world – ‘J’allais sur les boulevards, fière, dans des robes entrouvertes sur les autres’ (77) – but her new rapport with others (and with herself) lacks authenticity and rests on the visual – ‘Je voyais alors dans leurs yeux comme il me serait facile de les séduire’ (78). She mistakes body for self as she did paper for skin, and invests temporary dermal recovery with a new relation with society. Her new body is synonymous with a new (proper) place – ‘J’avais déménagé pour un appartement plus grand: un vrai deux-pièces qui donnait sur un petit square vert’ (77) – a new role – ‘Je m’étais mise au travail’ (77) – which allows her to safely conclude on her “normality”

(read discipline?): ‘Je devenais sociale’ (77). The Foucauldian resonances of her social reintegration moreover highlight the importance of the functionality of the subject, (visibly) fit for her role in society. From ‘fruit goûteux’ to rotten fruit overnight, psoriasis resurfaces on Irène’s skin as the (forgotten) worm in her body. ‘Et au matin, je perçus de très loin, du fond des ans, me pousser une affreuse petite démangeaison’ (78). Unable to remain in society and unwilling to be part of it ‘avant d’être venue à bout de ma pitoyable différence’ (84), her attempt to get of rid of what causes her rejection (her skin) echoes the shortcoming of her social framework. Effectively, Irène begins to self-reject: ‘Je me scalpais moi-même, devenant ainsi inutilisable, mauvaise machine, en dehors de la grande industrie...’ (93-94). Once again brutality and rejection guide this transitional stage, as Irène struggles to exclude the erupting ‘démangeaison’ from the possible, the now, the “me”: ‘Je luttais une heure durant, refusant de céder à cet envahissement brutal, inattendu, impensable pour moi’ (79). Irène is met with abjection once more, in Kristeva’s words, ‘une de ces violentes et obscures révoltes de l’être contre ce qui le menace et qui lui paraît venir d’un dehors ou d’un dedans exorbitant, jeté à côté du possible, du tolérable, du pensable’.²⁵⁶ However unavoidable her hybridity has become, Irène remains unable to envisage dialogue with her own difference or to find terms to live with her hybridity.

As I have shown, rage and violence frame Irène’s writing (initiative) and prevent progression in her introspection and her story. This stagnation is corroborated with the short pause during which she lives ‘sans souci [...], avec la joie réelle mais combien surprenante de [se] sentir identique aux autres’ (78) and by extension, a stranger to her “real” self, subsequently going back to square one, her ‘démangeaison’. This posits writing as a failed attempt at articulating her own hybridity; it takes her back to her initial helplessness. As Robson argues, ‘It seems that her writing has acted like a second skin, covering rather than revealing, and masking the truth of her identity, even as it simulated cure. Writing contains, rather than articulating and expelling, her difference, and as such it too operates as failed testimony.’²⁵⁷ Irène symbolically reproduces the principle of the illness she is trying to evade, adding the superfluous dead layers of skin that she is forever bound to peel off her surface.

3.4.2 Writing (through) social constriction: change or repetition?

²⁵⁶ Kristeva *Pouvoirs*, p. 9.

²⁵⁷ Robson, “L’écriture de peau”, p. 74.

Irène's introspection is superficial and can only provide an unreliable answer (temporary relief) and stress the fragility of the subject. Moreover, it was also misguided; she explains,

Ainsi je m'étais trompée, car ce n'était pas eux, non pas eux les responsables, la famille, les familles, mais plutôt l'affreuse oppression d'un système, qu'ils maintiennent dans un aveuglement qui n'a d'égal que leur capacité à se persuader du contraire (84).

Irène's family is pictured as belonging to a larger system based on the rejection of (visible) difference; they are simultaneously victims and perpetrators of this imposed rule, functioning as a micro-disciplinary framework similarly based on acceptance-rejection of the subject according to (visible) identifiable parameters.²⁵⁸ As I have demonstrated in Chapter 2, the docile subject who willingly perpetuates (on) him/herself the rules of the disciplinary institution, is caught in a network of gazes. Emphasis on visibility to assess difference within Irène's family unit orchestrates the relationships with one another, dictating their affective interactions (place and also love via touch) with the one who was stained with a genetic disease. Ironically, and in Nobécourt's words, it is in 'un aveuglement' that Irène's family perpetrate this fallacious system; the family's fundamental protective role is replaced by (unconscious) obedience to the rules of visible (that is, judged from external criteria) belonging to the group. Irène's similar focus on (and rejection of) exterior difference indicates her attachment to her family and their principles, and also shows her awareness of being/having been a self-disciplined docile body. In a nutshell, she is confronted with her own self-deception:

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, c'était d'eux que je m'étais nourrie, et à mon tour ayant crié, j'avais tué, exterminé, égorgé, décapité. Cela avec l'illusion radicale que j'échappais à leur pensée médiocre. (85)

Furthermore, she is faced with the fallacies of her own testimonial (her cries and writing). But Irène comes to the conclusion that,

²⁵⁸ In my next chapter, I explore reproduction as a means for the couple/family to create identifiable offspring, focusing on the extreme case of cloning as a potential answer for a successful reproduction.

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 en vain. Je m'étais battue, mais mon ennemi n'était point celui que j'avais cru qu'il fut. (85-86)

Her text only translates her repetition and incorporation of the precepts of exclusion, by a self-disciplined docile subject, instead of acting as denunciation of them via a narrative of self-assertion in hybridity and unique individual difference. 'J'avais à la fois exagéré le tout, comme chacun, et en même temps si peu vu ma propre incapacité à supporter ce que j'étais' (85). Her dependence on a system which cannot accept her is mirrored in her dependence on a body she cannot live with. Her confession that 'Aujourd'hui ce n'était plus la famille que je rejetais, non, mais eux, tous les autres, les serviles heureux, tandis que mon sang c'était moi, mon corps mon unité' (97), simultaneously reveals a shift of target for her anger, and a confusing equation between (disgusting) body and self whose psychic disorder announces other bodily and mental perturbations. Thinking she was escaping/defying the rules of a system, she reinforces them through a failed testimony, constraining her further because of physical difference, and metaphorically solidifying the boundaries which contain her uncontrollable, unexpellable invading Otherness.

Irène's violence, against her body and within her texts could be analysed as awkward translations of frustration, echoes of the childhood beatings by her mother who could not come to terms with such difference on a familiar body (her daughter's, Irène's).²⁵⁹ This violence could also represent a rage against her own inability to conform to the rules of her family, society, and those of the physically proper. Before writing, violence is first directed onto her own body, and later her monstrosity, abjection and violence are displaced onto and contained in the text; but as writing comes to an end and ceases to frame her rage, the unleashing of violence must find another platform. 'Alors j'ai cessé d'être en guerre, et c'est ainsi que je leur suis devenue – sans aucune volonté de ma part – réellement nuisible' (76). She experiences this cease-fire as she has (apparently) discharged all (her hatred for) her own difference. Yet, when she realises that her text is a lie just as she has avoided her true identity, she finds herself unable again to deal with this difference and the (internal) struggle for domination is metaphorically expelled out of the body and re-played on/with others. Moreover, I would argue that she also

²⁵⁹ I observe similar depictions of parental violence towards the unrecognised child, towards both children characters (Elise and France) in Chapter 4.

becomes ‘nuisible’ to herself, falling beyond ‘co-existence’ to symbolic suicide and self-annihilation. As she abandons her difficult (but essential) dialogue with hybridity and with it the renegotiation of her identity, she symbolically abandons humanity and lets the Other, the animal-plant within, take over.²⁶⁰ I have explained above that when Irène confesses to her own scalping (93-94), she re-enacts and assimilates social rejection. Moreover, scalping and any removal of skin is life-threatening, and it could also be interpreted as a (forced) shedding of her skin, an abandonment of her untenable hybrid identity, in order to effectuate her ultimate metamorphosis.

3.4.3 Victim and kamikaze: exiting human and social embodied life to reform perceptions

From the onset of *La Démangeaison*, the reader is confronted with diverging opinions to explain Irène’s psoriasis. Since her family fixedly believes in her mental deficiencies ‘C’est le cerveau qui est atteint...’ (32), Irène refuses any anaesthetic to stitch a childhood play wound (‘le trou’) on her forehead. She is adamant to remain lucid to prevent any alteration of her brain (her “inside”), which could lead her to lose her mind (33). This episode shows a character who, although still very young, feels endangered in/by her environment and chooses to suffer so as to protect her singularity, her particular ‘conscience de [son] être’ (32). Antithetically, Irène is portrayed in the latter part of her story as willingly peeling the skin off her head, symbolically unstitching her previously guarded ‘trou’ and abandoning the specificities of her identity, finally aligning herself with “their” diagnostic: ‘Le lendemain je devins ce qu’ils nomment folle’ (87). Mentally disconnected with herself, Irène is self-alienated via the terminal metamorphoses which moreover condemn her to other, definite forms of exile. She loses her former place in society (‘je déménageai sur les hauteurs de Montmartre, plus proche des quartiers sombres’ (89)), her function (‘je ne pouvais [...] retourner travailler’ (86)), and her life ‘‘il ne fut plus question de reprendre une vie normale’ (89)).

Irène’s illness does not only affect her place in society and with(in) her own body, it even governs her emotions: ‘Oui, ma démangeaison, que j’ai haïe avant de l’adorer, car

²⁶⁰ As Irène’s metamorphosis gains ground on her body, it becomes the symbolic representation of the individual who can no longer live with herself and in the world. If the monstrous, like the abject, threatened but still helped, or forced, her to negotiate the contours of her subjectivity, the abandoning of her life-long struggle is an abandoning of life and her identity.

elle seule a su m'écarter' (95). These fluctuations between extreme forms of emotional reactions are mirrored in her bodily excesses. She is devoted to '[sa] nouvelle insanité', which she defines as 'celle de me laisser aller à l'envahissement *monstrueux* de cette maladie' (89-90, my emphasis). Although 'lucide', she describes herself as 'en partance vers une pure intériorité, proche de l'indifférence, vers une toxicité insoutenable'. This merging with the Other is noxious to her physiology and also to her exterior physique: 'Je n'avais plus de quoi échanger avec l'extérieur, j'inquiétais encore, mon corps n'affichait aucune résistance, non, je ne retenais rien de ce qui s'emballait' (94). Irène lets the Other within dictate her appearance and gestures. Out of touch with the exterior world, she forgets its fundamental principle of physical containment and propriety, as she evokes 'les scarifications béantes que je laissais traîner sur mes tissus [...] comme autant de preuves de mon étrangeté' (94). Openly showing (off) her difference on her skin, she presents herself to the world solely through her difference (almost welcoming outside rejection). The defeated captain of her own ship, she is henceforth under her Other's dominion, only able to self-define through negation: 'Je retenais mon mal comme une définition'.²⁶¹ Moreover, if her inability to confine to bodily norms places her on the fringe of the social world, she also envisages her status of outlaw as liberating from her from physical constriction. However, as I will eventually unveil in the conclusion to this chapter, the so-called liberating nature of her final metamorphosis remains highly questionable. To a certain extent, her monstrosity here is her *carte blanche* to look and act more freely – 'Aucun devoir pour moi de rendre compte, mon visage affichait de lui-même mon refus, c'était bon' (94) – and to challenge other fundamentals of her society (here, of compulsory corporeal propriety which her psoriasis prevents). She explains, 'je me condamnais volontairement à refuser cette bonne santé épargnante, indispensable pour la vie professionnelle, nécessaire à la mascarade grotesque de la comédie sociale. En bonne santé, les autres l'étaient plus par peur que par choix' (94). Similarly to her particular body movements and constant scratching, her opposition to 'les autres' and their 'mascarade grotesque' is an enacted gesture of difference. Irène's conscious (and initially brave) choice to wear no mask and to play no role (or so she believes?) could be interpreted as a suicidal act of rebellion. As she confesses that, 'j'aurais dû prendre de ces médicaments qui endorment, qui abrutissent, de ces piqûres infâmes qui vous

²⁶¹ Similarly, Nobécourt writes in *La Conversation*, 'La négation de l'individu s'achève par la négation de son corps'. (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1998), p. 144.

rendent docile' (96), her refusal to treat her illness in order to submit to the social precept of visible "normality" is indeed a 'condamna[tion] volontair[e]', an obvious threat to her own health. Furthermore, she is indocile and challenges the disciplinary methods and their enforcement through imposed health: 'Leurs pensées hygiéniques me répugnaient' (97).²⁶² But as I show next, her disobedience dooms her to inevitable rejection and punishment, in the form of complete metaphorical loss into her Other, and her final punitive recuperation/incarceration by a disciplinary institution. However, could this extreme act of provocation be understood as a desperate call for individual help, and signify a call for social change? If this mask is tantamount to Robson's 'second skin', is Irène's decision to not wear one an ultimate attempt to initiate her introspection? It could be argued that this represents an invitation to free ourselves of polymorphous constricting layers and boundaries in order to reconcile individual identity with individual difference. Especially as illnesses can be passed on, hide in genes and suddenly erupt, Nobécourt's text denounces the shortcomings of a social system based on the imposition of untenable bodily rules. This is a call to accept that the encounter with one's difference belongs to human life experience and, borrowing Shildrick's words, should not be seen, either by the individual or society, as 'a discrete event but the constant condition of becoming'.²⁶³

3.4.4 From monstrous transgressions/subversions to disciplinary recovery

In this final section, the exploration of the monstrous transgressions that take place at the end of *La Démangeaison*, and the response from the social context, will pave the way for the discussion in the conclusion of what is at stake when disrupting social codes. In the conclusion, I will interrogate whether Nobécourt offers new ways of looking at the monstrous body, and how potential visions of "recovery" may be played out in *La Démangeaison* and *L'Equarrissage*. It must be noted that "recovery" as I envisage it at the end of this chapter is to be understood first as "to retake" (when the establishment takes the unfit member out of society for correction/punishment), and also as a synonym of convalescence (raising the potential for cure and rehabilitation for the subject, and for the exploration of new ways of being in the body).

²⁶² Hygiene encompasses techniques of cleanliness and more generally all those that permit remaining healthy. In Chapter 5, I will explain how in the retirement home (a disciplinary institution), hygiene similarly works as a method to control its members.

²⁶³ Shildrick, p. 1

As previously observed, Irène's refusal to take part in this 'mascarade grotesque' pushes her away from society, and also excludes her from humanity. She wears no mask but is not showing her true face either: she has not reconciled with her Other but merged with it. Previously, Irène's necessity to quench her 'démangeaison' translated a weakness or disempowerment, the young girl often lamenting in the morning the results of unconscious nocturnal scratching. From passivity to agency, Irène describes, 'je me ruai sur moi-même, plantant un à un mes dix ongles dans mes joues' (80). I notice here the return of the first-person singular to evoke the recipient of the scratching (body) and her tools (nails), which even seem to multiply, progressing from 'mes dix ongles' and 'j'attaquai à deux mains' to 'mille mains sur mon corps, mille ongles dans ma peau' (80-81). As 'La douleur même n'était plus une limite', Nobécourt aligns detachment from bodily sensation with a symbolic separation from the body. Irène's unrestrained scratching sessions culminate with the young woman who 'achevai[t] de [se] plonger dans l'extase' (88), extracted from her environment, in an "out-of-body" transcendental experience.²⁶⁴ Irène even toys with her itch, and confesses that sometimes, 'Je faisais durer la réjouissance' (88), echoing Kristeva's analysis of 'jouissance' when 'l'Autre' offers a moment of intense abjection, 'alienation sublime' revealing her 'existence déçue'. Kristeva writes about a 'jouissance [...] répugnante' in which 'le sujet s'engloutit',²⁶⁵ in *La Démangeaison*, Irène reveals that 'la démangeaison m'étourdissait de nouveau'. She also speaks of its 'Appétit forcené': 'je [la] nourrissais encore de mon sang et de mes squames, de mon pus et de mes liquides ancestraux' (81). I have noted before that Irène's constant scratching can be read as an enacted gesture of difference and a challenge to accepted social behaviour. Her unchecked internal invasion also forms part of her rebellion, which she feeds with and out of her own body. 'Avec mes mains, je raclais pour elle de quoi la *substantiver*' (81, italics in the original). Aware of her inability to write her 'démangeaison', Irène utilises the substances within her body to mutate it into a noun, to integrate it to her corporeal vocabulary, naming this devouring internal presence. This leaves Irène symbolically empty, dispossessed of her bodily appearance and interior, 'nue comme un ver' (82), metaphorically on the verge of death:

²⁶⁴ In *Robert des noms propres*, Plectrude's coveted ability to perform 'envol' is a search for transcendence and forms part of her metaphorical bird metamorphosis. Amélie Nothomb similarly portrays it as an 'extase' (144).

²⁶⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 17.

Ce fut comme une lumière étrange, jaune, folle, devant mes yeux, des sanglots monstrueux commencèrent d'éclater, je pleurais, mon corps devenait trop petit, je voulais qu'il [Rodolphe, her lover] déchire l'enveloppe qui m'oppressait, cette limite impossible, j'avais besoin d'espace, d'air, de frais (100)

The skin is the 'limite impossible' and she is going further than the frontier of the skin, of the body, of the self, towards a full metamorphosis into the beast. Indeed she has reached the limits of her capacity to put up with the enormous amounts of pain, stress and rejection which her skin can no longer contain.

Irène's monstrosity causes, or allows, multiple transgressions: she ignores social rules, breaches those of humanity, and her madness even leads her to violate the law (of moral conduct). However, the limits breached with the monstrous also point to the unsustainable excesses of this form of embodiment. Seeking to end the relationship with Irène, Rodolphe thanks her, 'De quoi?' Irène asks, and he replies, 'De ce qu'il est possible de faire autrement' (106). Their relationship revolved around Irène's body, 'as though hers is the only body at stake',²⁶⁶ penetrating and scratching her, merging different forms of pleasure and pain. The young man reveals how '[leur] expérience l'avait impressionné' and refers to his journey beyond various limits, temporarily sharing in alterity, seeing and enacting it with her. Indeed, their experience teaches him 'qu'il est possible de faire autrement', and symbolically to envisage (corporeal) difference as a part of human (embodied) life. But Irène is unstable and does not seem to tolerate the young man's analysis of their experience, and his ability to incorporate this enriching, eye-opening knowledge of human experience, into his life as a social being. She stabs Rodolphe and leaves him (like her) 'ouvert sur un autre infini' (109), symbolically condemning him (as she has been) to irrevocable exile. As Robson argues, when Rodolphe ends his relationship with Irène, 'she realizes implicitly that she can no longer testify to the liberating potential of social transgression.' Irène's 'Testimony here is linked with sexual pleasure, with transgression',²⁶⁷ similarly to her previous attempts to express, reject and come to terms with her difference, it fails. Irène is in an impasse: out of devices for writing and surfaces for inscription, the pens and nails she used to scratch paper, her skin and that of others have only eventually stressed the limitation of her personal freedom. At the end of *La Démangeaison*, the response from the social context is the incarceration of the protagonist; the verdict goes as follows: 'L'individu

²⁶⁶ Robson, "L'écriture de peau", p. 75.

²⁶⁷ Robson, "L'écriture de peau", p. 75.

fait partie d'un tout, et nous devons tout sacrifier pour l'ordre, y compris l'individu' (111-12). Irène has indeed been sacrificed: she is expelled from the society in which her unresolved hybridity has no place, shifting from symbolic to actual threat to this social framework.

3.5 Conclusion

At the end of *La Démangeaison* Irène is incarcerated but it remains unclear whether she is taken to a prison or a psychiatric institution. This lack of detail on the specific type of establishment which takes charge of the protagonist highlights their shared disciplinary function; moreover, it points to the more pressing need to extract the misfit from life in society. As suggested before, I observe here the first instance of “recovery” of the individual who is “retaken” (as in “repris(e)” or “récupéré(e)”) by the disciplinary system. This constitutes the social response to the character’s multiple transgressions, which the novel creatively recounts. As I have explored, Irène begins with a challenge of her own limits; she scratches her diseased skin to remove that which prevents contact with others and love from her kin. The incessant scratching (temporarily) allows her to channel her rage onto her own body, and the lesions on her skin caused by her psoriasis push the protagonist to explore in the depths of her flesh her internal plant-animal invasion. The disgusting crossing of boundaries, between inside and outside, and between me and not me, highlights the heterogeneity of the subject prone to an unsustainable ‘co-existence’. In her introspection, Irène fails the necessary process of toleration-exclusion of the abject, and she does not reach a “controlled” reconciliation with her internal Other who ends up overpowering her entirely. Irène’s monstrosity reaches its apogee when the Other inside has transformed her physical appearance and her behaviour; in my analysis I question the “liberating” nature of her voluntary abandonment into monstrosity. Indeed, it condemns her to social exclusion and to refuse medical treatment. Moreover, as the character claims her rejection of the ‘mascarade grotesque de la comédie sociale’ (94), I argue that she is in fact forced to put on another mask, the mask of her Other, rather monstrously described as ‘une sorte de face ronde et lunaire où se cotoyaient crevasses sèches et pus laiteux’ (50). As Irène’s final act of transgression reveals, there seems to be no real “new way” of looking at the monstrous body but rather a depiction of the failures of existing perceptions of the monstrous body. The violence of the monstrous subject progressively becomes uncontainable; Irène’s tumultuous relationship with her broken body eventually transfers onto the body

of others. Indeed the murder of Rodolphe represents the ultimate violation of the body; I argue that it is a double violation of the law. Firstly, as a violation of moral law, it entails the incarceration of the monstrous murderer. Secondly, it is a disruption of social codes. Rodolphe does not recede (as would be expected) but engages with Irène's monstrosity. In a process not dissimilar to the narrator of *L'Equarrissage*, he explores the limits of Irène's flesh and his own, and thus envisages (corporeal) monstrosity as part of human (embodied) life. Overall, even if *La Démangeaison* does not strictly provide any new way of looking at the monstrous body, it still envisages a possible creative and productive way of interacting with it. Rodolphe embodies this possibility, which simultaneously highlights the necessity to re-think corporeal difference in contemporary society.

In the final section of this conclusion, I suggest that *La Démangeaison* and *L'Equarrissage* differently explore potential visions of "recovery" as the possibility of convalescence is mediated through the creative process. At the end of *La Démangeaison*, after confessing to various lies, Irène closes her story with 'Voilà' (114). Robson argues that 'With this final statement, Nobécourt's novel passes on to the reader the implication that *some kind* of testimony has been offered'.²⁶⁸ But what kind of testimony, and what has it achieved? It also invites the reader to go back to the beginning of the character's life/story, and question their (causative) relationship: 'Et voilà, je suis née paralysée' (11). These two 'voilà' create a circular structure to the story of Irène, which unfolds guided by the exploration of the causes and consequences of the character's bodily difference. The discovery about the lies may ignite the reader's curiosity and invite a questioning (rereading) of the whole story, but it could also be said that these lies (and the circular structure of the text) bring confusion and entrap the reader in countless rereadings of the same (unreliable) story, and fail to achieve any new reading of monstrosity and bodily difference.

In *La Démangeaison*, the character strives to pin down the causes of her malaise; eventually, she discovers that it was not straightforwardly her family's rejection of her difference that caused her skin condition, but the dependence on a wider social system. Psoriasis remains unrelated to her family's intolerance, and Nobécourt's text leaves the whole 'maladie' undefined, which itself contributes to the abjection of the character. It is furthermore related to the character's monstrosity, as I have

²⁶⁸ Robson, "L'écriture de peau", p. 77, my italics.

determined, because she attempts to rid herself of this malaise while it is in fact part of who she is. The inability to come to terms with this fundamental difference compels the family and the character to find a cause for it, hypothesising on possible psychological disturbances or on birth paralysis (whilst medically speaking these remain unconnected to the protagonist's psoriasis). Just as Irène later turns to writing, it would seem that all characters differently attempt to inscribe it in a logical narrative (whilst it is always illogical). This explains why Irène is eventually faced with the fallacies of her own testimonial (her cries and writing). Her failed self-narrative is ultimately only a repeat of society's limited focus (on physical impropriety) and is restricted to violence. On the other hand, Nobécourt's narrative (*L'Equarrissage*) opens up alternative conceptions of the body and it does not attempt to cover up this corporeal difference (or to overcome dichotomies), which in turn allows for a fluid definition of its own 'maladie'. Both Nobécourt's texts explored in this chapter have a similar premise, but differ in their nature and outcomes. Contrary to Irène, the narrator in *L'Equarrissage* reaches a form of reconciliation with her internal Other. This text is a hybrid personal narrative, it is not a novel like *La Démangeaison*, it is not an attempt to write the story of a character but only to narrate the experience of the individual. Furthermore, in *L'Equarrissage*, the subject's introspection is linked with the acknowledgement of her own individuality, of her difference. There is no opposition to the outside or society but rather this text points beyond binary formats, and the immediate context provides the narrator with the space and understanding necessary for introspection. In the Preface to *L'Equarrissage*, Nobécourt writes, 'Je voudrais ici rendre hommage à un homme qui m'a donné d'apercevoir autrefois cette envivrante clarté [...] Il n'a jamais rien demandé. Donné, seulement donné' (9-10). Rather than an 'overcoming of dichotomies', Nobécourt's texts signal beyond binary oppositions and invite other ways of looking and interacting with one's and other's visible difference.

In the next chapter of this thesis, the monstrosity of the subject and rejection of the "inappropriate" individual depends on the tolerance and acceptance, but also on the expectations of the immediate context. In this chapter, I have explored Nobécourt's denunciation of contemporary society's inability to tolerate difference; in Chapter 4, I analyse via the theme of reproduction forms of eradication of difference. So far in Chapter 2 and 3, the (socially) inapt subject has been identified via corporeal markers; however, what happens when difference is not straightforwardly visible on the body, when it is coded differently and elsewhere? The multiple monstrous characters in my

next chapter show a new kind of monstrosity – less visible, more treacherous – one that erupts unexpectedly and reveals the deceptions within the context of its creation.

Chapter 4. Monstrosity and failed reproductions in Louise L. Lambrichs's *A ton image*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to the exploration of the human subject in another stage in the human lifecycle – reproduction – when the eruption of the monstrous speaks of the subject's inability to meet definite criteria, and of his/her environment's rejection of difference. I will explore how reproduction has been read by critics as a social institution; its functioning is reminiscent of Foucauldian theory, and as such imposes on subjects sets of rules and levels of surveillance. The disciplining of the subject via reproduction concerns both the genitors and their offspring, and in my reading of Louise Lambrichs's *A ton image*²⁶⁹ I focus on the effects of the application of the principles of reproduction on and by the parents and on the children in the novel.

Reproduction is a period in the human lifespan that could be located at the onset of life (focusing specifically on the birth and the child), or as an episode in adulthood. I chose to situate reproduction as a stage in adult human life, which explains why this chapter finds its place in the middle of my thesis. As this chapter will unveil, the rules of reproduction constitute the parents' expectations of reproduction (their specific desire for children and what they expect of their offspring) as well as the parents' expected ability to produce, and relate to/engage in relationships with, these children. In my study, I will explore how this assessment on the outcome of reproduction brings about processes of rejection when subjects are deemed as "failures", and produces monstrosity.

The rules and expectations of reproduction are endemic to the two families portrayed in Lambrichs's text: they define how parents see and interact with their offspring. Moreover these rules also affect the reproducing subjects themselves and lead them to becoming victims when the criteria of reproduction are not met. In this study, my exploration of instances of the parent-child relationship in *A ton image* will divulge cases of child abuse and inappropriate behaviour of adults with children. Therefore, children are (almost always) the victims of adults' behaviour and expectations of

²⁶⁹ Louise L. Lambrichs, *A ton image* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 1998). Subsequent references to this text will be from the same edition and page numbers will be provided in brackets in the text. The novel was adapted for the cinema in 2004 by Aruna Villiers.

reproduction, which reinforces the notion of reproduction as a stage in adult life and further justifies the place of this chapter in my work. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that the parent-child relationship forms the backbone of reproduction itself, and appears differently in the two cases of monstrous characters (as unsuccessful reproductions) that I explore. If these two characters, Elise and France, are brought up in very different contexts, in each case the parent-child relationship reflects the expectations of reproduction of their child. Whether initially considered as a failure (Elise is a mentally retarded child) or as success (France is a clone and a “scientific miracle”), the children in Lambrichs’s text who ultimately do not meet their parents’ expectations are rejected as unfit and monstrous.

4.1.1 Louise L. Lambrichs: life and texts

Louise Lambert Lambrichs was born in 1952 in the Paris region in a family of known literary figures. Her mother, Gilberte Lambrichs, was a writer and translator (who published under the pen name Constance Delaunay); her father, also a writer and a literary critic, was a famous publisher at Editions de Minuit, Gallimard and later director of *La Nouvelle Revue française*. The intellectual environment of her upbringing undoubtedly played an important role in shaping Louise L. Lambrichs’s own career path; indeed, like her father, she studied philosophy at university and then turned to the world of writing and publishing. Besides producing fiction – I return specifically to her novels later – Lambrichs is a prolific writer who has published numerous essays on medical and therapeutical epistemology,²⁷⁰ others on recent history and conflicts (in the Balkan states),²⁷¹ literary essays²⁷² and a book of photographs.²⁷³ She has also participated in multiple (academic) conferences, where she has conveyed her reflections on topics such as medicine and ethics, and more precisely cloning, the welcoming of the

²⁷⁰ *Histoire de la pensée médicale contemporaine: Evolutions, découvertes, controverses*, ed. by Bernardino Fantini and Louise L. Lambrichs (Paris: Seuil, 2014); Louise L. Lambrichs, *Le Livre de Pierre: Psychisme et cancer* (Paris: Editions de Différence, 1995).

²⁷¹ Louise L. Lambrichs, *Le Cas Handke: Conversation à bâtons rompus* (Paris: Inventaire/Invention, 2003); *Nous ne verrons jamais Vukovar* (Paris: Editions Philippe Rey, 2005).

²⁷² Louise L. Lambrichs, *La Littérature à l'épreuve du réel* (Sarrebriick: Editions Universitaires Européennes, 2010). This essay emanates from her doctoral thesis of the same title at the Sorbonne in Paris.

²⁷³ Louise L. Lambrichs, *Naître... et naître encore: Sur les photos de Sarah Ney* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001).

child after birth, the mother-child bond and the prenatal connection between parents and the foetus.²⁷⁴

The fruits of Lambrichs's intellectual and philosophical reflection span multiple books, essays and interventions, and also include texts of fiction. Amongst the themes that I have identified so far in Lambrichs's writing, several reappear – and new ones emerge – in the six novels she has published to date. Rye and Worton's volume situates Lambrichs as a figure of the new generation of women writers in France in the 1990s, and also as one of the 'lesser-known writers like Clotilde Escalle'.²⁷⁵ In her novels, Lambrichs deals with themes that have come to characterise the literature of this generation of authors. Literary explorations on the contemporary notion of the family, family relationships and generational inheritances all feature in her first four novels (this includes *A ton image*).²⁷⁶ Other themes such as explorations of identity and self-other relation (particularly doubling/identifications) appear in other texts of fiction by Lambrichs and intersect with my reading of *A ton image*.²⁷⁷ The author's latest novel *Le Rêve de Sonja*,²⁷⁸ published in 2013, narrates the impossible love relationship between a Serbian and a Muslim, and testifies of a thematic crossover between people's affective relationships and reflections on contemporary conflicts.

4.1.2 Critical readings of Lambrichs's fiction, and my proposed argument

In terms of the critical literature that has been produced on Lambrichs's novel, this author is comparable to Lorette Nobécourt. Indeed, Lambrichs and Nobécourt are both lesser-known literary figures, they have published fewer novels and have received less

²⁷⁴ Louise L. Lambrichs, *Puisqu'ils n'en diront rien: La violence faite aux bébés* (Paris: Editions Bayard, 2009); Louise L. Lambrichs and Jean-Pierre Relier, *L'aimer avant qu'il naisse: Le lien mère-enfant avant la naissance* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993). Lambrichs is also secretary of 'La Cause des Bébés'; this association supports research and diffusion of knowledge on the child before and after birth, and works to ensure that after birth the child is recognised and given a full place as a human being.

(See their website, <<http://lacausedesbebes.free.fr>> [accessed 26 February 2015]).

See also Lambrichs's position on new reproductive technologies and involvement with the association 'Choisir la cause des femmes', to which I refer in the Introduction of the thesis (at the end of the section 1.2 Post-1990 France: the social, political and ideological context).

²⁷⁵ Rye and Worton, 'Introduction', p. 1.

²⁷⁶ Louise L. Lambrichs, *Le Cercle des sorcières* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1987); *Journal d'Hannah* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1993); *Le Jeu du roman* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1995).

²⁷⁷ Louise L. Lambrichs, *Aloïs, ou La nuit devant nous* (Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, 2002); and her short story, 'Anatole', *Bon à tirer*, 2 (2001) <<http://www.bon-a-tirer.com/volume2/III.html>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

²⁷⁸ Louise L. Lambrichs, *Le Rêve de Sonja* (Paris: La Rumeur libre, 2013).

critical attention than authors like Amélie Nothomb. Nevertheless, several themes explored in Lambrichs's novels (reviewed in the previous section) such as family histories and the (re)writing of the past – and which to a certain extent intersect with my work – have attracted the attention of critics. In her article 'The Ethics of Aesthetics in Trauma Fiction', Rye offers an exploration of the connections between personal stories and historical events. She focuses on the multiple mirrors within (the story and the narrative structure in) *Journal d'Hannah* and establishes a dialogue between traumatic episodes in personal life (abortion) and in history (the Holocaust), whilst offering an interrogation on the place and role of guilt in these historical/personal events.²⁷⁹ The exploration of traumatic episodes in the human lifespan also features in Best's reading of *Journal d'Hannah* and *A ton image* in her article entitled 'Louise L. Lambrichs: trauma, dream and narrative'. Via Lambrichs's novels she analyses how the individual who experiences trauma and retains these memories in his/her mind may find in dreams other stories and other ways of expressing the traumas that would otherwise remain locked in the subject's psyche. Best's article explores the (dis)connections between narrative and dream in their ability to grant the subject means to articulate traumatic events of the past and to inquire into forms of rehabilitation from trauma.²⁸⁰

Critics of Lambrichs's fiction have also focused on the portrayal of a clone in *A ton image* and examined it in conjunction with the theme of the family and family relationships in this author's writing. At first, the creation of a clone may appear to Jean (the scientist) as a way to avoid repeating the parental mistakes of his parents and to start a new family. However the human subject that Jean "creates" is rather treated as an object and remains confined to a figure of repetition (a repeat/copy of another individual, Françoise) which symbolically limits Jean's potential to escape traumas of the past. Indeed, in her article entitled 'Family Histories: Reproduction, Cloning and Incest', Robson examines how the clone mirrors the entrapment of the character Jean within structures that repeat themselves in the family. Whilst trying to escape tragedies, the character who tells stories about the family is eventually caught up by family histories themselves. Robson reveals that in *A ton image*, the biggest threat to individual freedom and subjectivity is not strictly posed by science (here cloning) but rather by

²⁷⁹ Gill Rye, 'The Ethics of Aesthetics in Trauma Fiction: Memory, Guilt and Responsibility in Louise L. Lambrichs's *Journal d'Hannah*', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 9 (2009), pp. 48-59.

²⁸⁰ Victoria Best, 'Louise L. Lambrichs: trauma, dream and narrative', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 29-41.

family histories themselves.²⁸¹ In my reading of *A ton image*, what constricts characters is their desires for reproduction and for specific outcomes in the form of their offspring. Both children and parents are victimised (and risk becoming monstrous) by these expectations that limit human subjects and dictate the parent-child relationship.

In another article entitled ‘Le fantôme à venir: inceste et clonage dans *A ton image*’, Best explores the impossibility for the subject in *A ton image* to (fully) escape traumas of the past. She shows how these events remain “alive” in the minds of characters, and embodied by the clone. She analyses the character of France as a spectre, as a figure of the past, neither dead or alive and outside binary oppositions.²⁸² In this chapter, I will demonstrate that France appears as a monstrous character because she disrupts these binary oppositions; neither allowed to be a separate individual nor able to take the place of her “mother”, she functions as one of Curti’s ‘hybrid shapes’, ‘at the intersection between [...] the self and many other selves’.²⁸³ The limitations imposed on France’s identity originate from the expectations of reproduction of her “father”, and of the role that she is ultimately unable to fulfil. If, as I argue, monsters are projections of our fears and desires – they come from us, they are made by us and are rejected by us – then it would seem that the strong presence of impossible expectations of reproduction in *A ton image* can only condemn children to become monsters.

My analysis in the first two chapters of this thesis of the processes of creation of monstrous subjects – that is, where and how monstrosity emerges – provides in the present chapter the critical and theoretical foundations necessary to unveil what makes Elise and France an altogether different type of monstrous subject. Like Plectrude and Irène, the monstrous subjects in *A ton image* are portrayed as abject characters within strict (disciplinary) frameworks. However, the forms of rejection that they experience differ from previous portrayals of self-rejection of corporeal difference and also because the criteria which make these monsters may be re-evaluated within the story. Ultimately, my analysis will reveal that Elise and France provide a link and an evolution between different forms of monstrosity as explored within this chapter, and between previous chapters in this thesis and the final one in my study. Indeed in this fourth chapter, I analyse how Lambrichs challenges differently, and complexifies, the ways

²⁸¹ Kathryn Robson, ‘Family Histories: Reproduction, Cloning and Incest in Louise Lambrichs’, in *Affaires de famille*, ed. by Barnet and Welch, pp. 251-65.

²⁸² Victoria Best, ‘Le fantôme à venir: inceste et clonage dans *A ton image* de Louise L. Lambrichs’, in *Nouvelles écrivaines*, ed. by Morello and Rodgers, pp. 181-99.

²⁸³ Curti, p. 29.

monstrosity is generated and perceived. In *A ton image* with the characters of Elise and France (and also of Jean, the narrator), the author creatively explores the intersections between the misleading and deceptive aspects of monstrosity (close to the *monstrum*), and the monster as *monstrare* which not only shows but speaks of its surroundings (beyond its own self) and ‘point[s] to that which is worthy of warning’.²⁸⁴

I explore the intersections between reproduction and monstrosity and in a first part I show that monstrosity arises within the context of dysfunctional parenting. My analytical reading of Lambrichs’s novel will reveal that Elise’s monstrosity is related to her abject immersion in the Semiotic (the word of the maternal) – I utilise Kristeva’s theories on abjection and melancholia²⁸⁵ – to unhealthy family relationships, and to the overall regressive attitudes of her backward context. In my second part, I explore how France, in contrast to Elise, is brought up in an environment oblivious to her “real” identity as a clone – Jean (the scientist who clones her) is the only family member to know the origin of France – and is therefore treated as a child by her “mother” and “grandparents”. In his story Jean relates his personal struggle to position himself in relation to France and in connection to Françoise (that is, his failure to allow France the full place as a human being), which eventually transforms his “daughter” into a monstrous subject. For him, she is a monstrous child and eventually a failed reproduction because, like in the case of Elise, France is unable to fulfil the multiple positions defined for her by her “mother” and “father”. I will conclude my reading of monstrous subjects in this chapter with an exploration of modes of reassessment of monstrosity in *A ton image*; as I will unveil, the text ultimately proposes to the reader the possibility of rereading the story and of re-thinking how the monstrous is constructed in this novel.

4.2 Elise as monstrous subject and failed reproduction within the dysfunctional family environment

4.2.1 Presenting an unusually “unremarkable” monster

It should first be noted that the evaluation of Elise’s monstrosity does not straightforwardly emanate from a visible bodily impropriety; as monstrous figures go, she is rather “unremarkable”. *A ton image* does not draw on colourful Ovidian

²⁸⁴ Knoppers and Landes, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

²⁸⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 83.

animal/vegetal metamorphoses of human subjects; Elise manifests no immediately identifiable physical difference, contrary for instance to the deformity (and later the skin lesions) which stigmatise the subject of Nobécourt's texts and which ignite the development of monstrosity. As I will show, Elise's monstrosity is still nonetheless connected to the body (she is also an abject character); but in Lambrichs's text, I read a more complex form of corporeal impropriety as it reaches beyond her own body and involves that of others. My focus on the theme of reproduction will allow me to reflect on the emergence of the monstrous in the relationship between the parents and their offspring. If it is true that you can never be monstrous by yourself because it takes other people (to imagine and to reject the monster), I will demonstrate how this postulate is explored in Lambrichs's text.

In *A ton image*, the portrayal of Elise is characterised by an absence of a direct access to the character; contrary to Nobécourt's texts, the story is not told from the perspective of the monstrous subject, nor does it possess Nothomb's questioning yet ambiguous narrative voice. Here, the story of Elise is told via a first-person narration from the perspective of her brother Jean (whose reliability will be questioned later) who only gives brief accounts of his sister's condition. This kind of "narrative constriction" or "visual narrowing" of the character is complemented by physical and spatial confinement; Elise evolves uniquely within the limits of the family estate (except for one episode in the text), under the ascendance of her parents (and later her husband).

It is within this context that Elise is portrayed as a monstrous character.

Similarly to Chapter 3, in this chapter the family of the subject represents the context which will provide the rules of acceptance-rejection of the unfit individual. While in Chapter 3 Irène has transgressed the rules of physical propriety and also those of social and moral conduct (she is monstrous "for all" and therefore excluded from familial and social existence), it is not immediately clear what causes a rather passive and subdued character like Elise to be a monstrous subject. Moreover, similarly to Chapter 2, the rules against which the subject is judged are endemic to the context; Plectrude must embody the physical appearance and abilities of her role (a ballet dancer), while here Elise must fulfill the expectations set by her parents. It is my position in this chapter that the said rules are defined by the parents who expect of their offspring certain sets of criteria, which they have predefined according to their own present situation and their personal desires. I will attempt to decipher how the workings of reproduction may produce monstrous subjects. The first question however that will guide my reading of

Lambrichs's text in the next sections is the following: how might the relationship between parents and offspring trigger the emergence of the monstrous?

4.2.2 Dysfunctional parenting: the unhealthy father-daughter relationship and abnormal family dynamics

In this section I explore the family dynamics within the Letertre household. I focus especially on the character of Elise and her relationship with her parents, particularly with the strong figure of her father. The unhealthy environment in which she is brought up affects the development of her subjectivity and her behaviour with others, which lays the basis for her becoming monstrous. However, as then I go on to explore, the abnormal relationships between the family members also affect the actions and emotions of Jean and his mother, and force each child to unconsciously devise methods of self-protection within/against the dysfunctional family context.

To begin to explore how characters (so far Plectrude and Irène) become monstrous, I first examined the affective and power relations at play in their surroundings, be they in a fully-fledged disciplinary institution or in a family context. Elise's relationship with her parents represents a determining factor in her psychological development – as is indeed the case for all children – but also in her becoming monstrous. In 'Le fantôme à venir: inceste et clonage dans *A ton image* de Louise L. Lambrichs', Victoria Best explains that this relationship provides the child with 'l'occasion de sa première rencontre à la fois avec l'amour et l'autorité'. Best stresses the complex and paradoxical nature of this relationship when she describes it as 'un réseau complexe d'amour et d'agression, de culpabilité et de complicité, souvent imparfait et jamais simple'.²⁸⁶ In the relationship between Elise and her parents, antitheses first appear in the parents' differing attitudes towards their child. One of the most striking depictions of this opposition is revealed whenever Elise is found 'livrée à elle-même et se traînant dans la cour jonchée de fumier' (57). Jean recalls his mother's reaction: 'Quand ma mère la retrouvait ainsi, souillée et puante, elle se contentait de la ramener à la maison et de la passer au jet avant de l'enfermer' (57). Her practical, unemotional yet non-abusive reaction stands in clear contrast with that of her father: 'il entraînait dans une fureur qui ne lui passait qu'après l'avoir traitée de tous les noms et battue jusqu'au sang' (57). Elise is

²⁸⁶ Best, 'Le fantôme à venir', p. 182.

caught between her mother's unsentimentality and her father's brutality and wild emotions; she is not provided with the necessary balanced measure of love and authority which later determines the child's own ability to herself establish the balance and control within her own subjectivity. As Best explains,

Le complexe d'Oedipe élaboré par Freud marque le moment où l'enfant prend conscience des liens d'amour et d'autorité qui l'entourent, et où il/elle entame la lutte de toute une vie, qui consiste à contrôler sa propre subjectivité, mais c'est aussi le moment où les désirs et les agressions des adultes sont contrôlés et régulés.²⁸⁷

The broken family environment greatly hinders Elise's psychological development, and the Oedipal stage explained by Best cannot be successfully resolved. Elise instead re-enacts her parents' antipodal attitudes and also displays a comparable absence of self-control; one moment she is pictured with 'un sourire hébété aux lèvres, regard[ant] dans le vide' (56) and the next moment we read, 'Elise soudain se cambra et, les bras et le visage tendus vers le ciel, se mit à hurler de toutes ses forces' (58-59). Elise's father does not display the required control and regulation of his aggression. Indeed his reactions systematically involve a level of violence, both in his actions (as seen above) and in his words, with insults (57), mockery of the child's disability (56), and threats of more physical violence to reprimand suspected misbehaviour: 'Gare à toi si je t'y prends! cria-t-il à Elise' (67). In addition to his unchecked aggression, the father also fails to exemplify the control of desires; such (sexual) desires naturally occur between the child and his/her parents and must be mastered by the parents who demonstrate to the child the limits of the law. Best writes that, 'La loi du père, son non, qui condamnent l'inceste, s'appliquent tout autant à son propre comportement s'il compte garder son autorité'.²⁸⁸ Elise however is a victim of child sexual abuse; in *A ton image*, it is first revealed to Jean when she leads him to the parental bedroom, slips under the covers, 'et posa sa tête sur l'oreiller du milieu'. Jean continues, 'Oui, je dis bien l'oreiller du milieu car dans le lit conjugal, et sur le moment cela me parut incompréhensible, il y avait bel et bien trois oreillers'. He confesses, 'Brusquement, j'eus un vertige' (64). A child's normal psychosexual development (which will not only later affect the development of his-her own sexuality, but also his/her overall subjectivity and social behaviour) is dependent on a healthy and "guarded" relationship with his/her parents. Elise is not raised having a healthy relationship with her parents,

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Best, 'Le fantôme à venir', p. 182.

nor taught the limits of her (moral) conduct. Several instances of Elise's unchecked sexual appetite punctuate Jean's narrative and reveal her availability to men: 'C'est qu'elle va les chercher!' (233), exclaims the mother to Jean later in the story. Elise reveals the incestuous relationship with her father immediately after having initiated and committed the same sinful act with her brother, who posits himself as 'victime d'un viol, une victime consentante et éblouie, je l'admets, mais victime néanmoins au sens où toute l'initiative dans cette affaire revient à Elise' (63). When faced with the revelation of long-term parental incest, Jean understands and writes, 'Ainsi, c'était cela. En m'amenant ici, elle me révélait leur secret et l'ampleur de son infortune tout en me livrant l'explication de sa conduite' (64).

The climate of abuse and violence is perpetrated and maintained by the father, patriach within the household; it affects all its members both in their immediate behaviour, and it lays the basis for later psychological troubles. I have demonstrated that Elise is a victim of emotional, verbal, physical and sexual mistreatment, which detracts the normal development of her subjectivity and relations with others. Moreover, Elise's mental disability, and possibly her younger age, certainly enhance her vulnerability, but she is not the sole family member affected by this dysfunctional context. As for Jean, his immediate response is to seek protection from this noxious environment by maintaining a distance from his family, via a general lack of involvement (59) and emotional detachment – his link with Elise amounts to 'de lointains rapports de cohabitation' (62) –, and via a dedication to his studies: 'j'avais vécu dans un autre univers, isolé, barricadé dans mes études et mes lectures, à mille lieues de ce monde dont j'étais pourtant issu mais dans lequel je n'avais appris que les pauvres mystères de la vie animale et la solitude' (62). Jean's instinct of self-preservation also intuitively tells him not to overstep his position, and prevents him from going to Elise's rescue. 'Comme si Elise, pour moi, restait l'objet de mes parents. Leur chasse gardée. Comme si intervenir pour elle, c'était lever la main contre eux' (59). The morning after the revelations of the incestuous activities within the household, Jean leaves for Paris to enter the medical school, and confesses: 'Ce matin-là je ne suis pas parti: j'ai fui. Comme un criminel? Plutôt comme un otage menacé de toutes parts et s'évadant d'un monde clos et délétère' (65). Jean's incest with his sister forces identification with his father's sins (65), and forever ties him to his family's misfortunes, and he describes himself as 'définitivement lié à ces êtres dont le secret, en même temps, me répugnait'. He continues, 'Aussi partir était-il devenu une nécessité. Et non seulement partir mais, si possible, oublier' (66). As

I will show later, despite his multifarious attempts to detach himself from the dysfunctional family environment and sinful acts, Jean's story (his actions and his errors) are fuelled by a clumsy yet desperate desire to soothe these childhood traumas (that he witnessed and underwent) and erase his parents' parenting failures by creating "for himself" a happy family.

The mother is another witness to the family problems and the mistreatment of Elise. While Jean regrets 'cette espèce de stupeur qui s'emparait alors de moi, m'empêchant d'intervenir et de venir à son secours [celui d'Elise]' (59), the reader may be inclined to feel sympathy towards the distraught young boy. However, concerning the mother, her lack of intervention essentially makes her an indirect participant in child abuse, especially because of her connivance with incest. Jean records one single intervention by his mother to defend Elise (or is it to save face in the presence of a stranger?), her 'regard furibond' which holds the father back as he is about to suggest (we presume) Elise's sexual availability to Robert, the new farm boy (57-58). The mother's feelings that are portrayed in the text are limited to her pity for the child, and her attitude towards Elise is dominated by a sense of practicality and a focus on daily 'tâches vitales' (57).

Within the dysfunctional family environment, Elise and Jean grow up between their father's explosive violence and unhealthy tendencies, and their mother's submissive non-intervention. Elise however is the most obvious victim who does not have the same opportunity as Jean to leave this noxious environment. I have noted above how, caught up between her parents' antagonistic attitudes, she re-enacts both their quiet passivity and explosive violence. But as Jean describes his sister as '[un être] tantôt inhabité [...], tantôt traversé, *mais de plus en plus rarement*, par des émotions dont j'avais souvent éprouvé l'extrême violence' (56-57, my emphasis), he notices a decrease in Elise's reproduction of the father's aggressivity. Instead, Elise becomes less and less violent and she increasingly withdraws within herself. It could be said that she leans towards her "mother's side" as, for want of active protection, the mother at least presents the least painful option, Elise's own solution for self-protection. When Jean is able to physically escape the family environment, I argue that Elise can only protect herself via mental retreat. In the next section, I propose to further the interpretation of Elise's re-enactment of her parents' antagonistic attitudes. My focus will be on her relationship with her mother, and I will analyse her absent behaviour and her "eruptions" not only as

re-enactment but as symptomatic of a child locked in the maternal, a psychic space which will function for Elise as a sanctuary and as a cage.

4.2.3 *Protective withdrawals in the maternal (abject)*

In the opening paragraph of the section dedicated to Elise, I first introduced the character as an unusually “unremarkable” monster. Her monstrosity paradoxically stands out (in contrast with Irène’s for instance) because of the absence of extraordinary physical appearance, whilst at the same time Elise’s monstrosity is still connected to the body. Yet it is not visible; or rather, it is expressed differently. Elise may also be deemed unremarkable because she is given limited stage presence in Jean’s story. Finally, she may be unremarkable because she is striving to remain as such. She is introduced to the reader by Jean as ‘ma soeur’ who ‘à son habitude jouait silencieusement sous la table’ (55), but later in the same episode, Jean confides another explanation for his sister’s location:

Supportant tant bien que mal son statut de chimère, elle avait compris que pour survivre, il fallait bouger le moins possible. Aussi restait-elle des heures sous la table, “à jouer” disions-nous pour sauver les apparences. Mais elle ne jouait pas. Elle demeurait tout juste prostrée, silencieuse (57).

The family’s desire to save face ignites the reader’s curiosity to investigate beyond appearances, and to examine the corporeal improprieties of an unremarkable body. Elise’s monstrosity is deceptive, and as *monstrare* it indicates the necessity to interrogate in its context what produced the monster. Indeed in Jean’s narrative we read that Elise is not under the table playing, and we soon deduce that this is where she seeks to escape her father’s violence (67). Finally, I would suggest, the table is symbolically her shelter where she can mentally escape this noxious family space, and retreat into her own silence/sphere. As a stay-at-home mother, Elise’s mother is often pictured in the kitchen and working around the table. Elise’s habitual refuge under the table draws her closer to her mother’s skirts, and reminds one of the French popular expression “être dans les jupons de sa mère”, which refers to a child who incessantly seeks his/her mother’s protection. I examine in this section Elise’s retreat in the maternal sphere as a protective (but ultimately harmful) response to the climate of aggressivity of her family environment.

If it is natural for the child to seek refuge and comfort with his/her mother, this bond (which is different and arguably stronger for daughters with their mothers) must

be broken, transformed, to allow the child to develop an independent subjectivity. The harmful relationships and insecure environment of her family context prevent the healthy psychological development of Elise. Her bond with her mother becomes “habitual” (see above quote page 55); it can be read as a prolongation of earlier periods of mother-child fusion and it does not evolve, and Elise fails to undergo the natural separation stage with the mother. Julia Kristeva’s *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie* presents several cases of tangled mother-daughter relationships, resulting in a difficult formation of an independent psychic (and even corporeal) identity from the part of the daughter. The first case study I read in Kristeva’s text concerns Hélène, a woman for whom the traces of childhood physical handicap seem to emerge in the form of fits of depression. These attitudes are forms of ‘enfermements’ provoked by situations that seem to challenge the patient’s ability to cope with the outside world. Kristeva writes,

Certaines situations (parler à plus d’une personne, se trouver dans un lieu public, défendre un avis qui n’est pas partagé par les interlocuteurs) provoquaient chez cette patiente un état de stupeur [...]. Un sentiment d’incapacité totale l’envahit et un effondrement rapide s’ensuit qui détache Hélène du monde, la fait se replier dans sa chambre, fondre en larmes et rester de longues journées sans paroles, sans pensées.²⁸⁹

Similar attitudes are recurrently found in Elise. She is described as mute throughout the novel. Words, ‘qu’elle n’avait jamais réussi à apprivoiser’ (231), do not belong to her universe – ‘[le silence] faisait partie d’elle-même’ (232) – but to an aggressive outside. Her brother hypothesises that the vulgarity and brutality of their familial surroundings have kept her in silence: ‘ce n’étaient pas les mots sans âme, brutaux et vulgaires, qui s’étaient échangés chez nous qui auraient pu lui donner le goût du langage’ (232). Moreover the aggressivity of her family’s violent words and gestures shuts her deeper inside her own world. As I have shown, the father’s violence with Elise is expressed through words and gestures, insults and beatings. This demonstrates the association of the linguistic with physical insult and aggression: ‘Elise alors ne criait pas. Les coups lui arrachaient tout juste de timides gémissements et, la tête entourée de ses bras, elle attendait que passe l’orage’ (57). Similarly to Kristeva’s observations, Elise’s reaction when confronted with external aggressive provocation is ‘un état de stupeur’,²⁹⁰ even a protective ‘renfermement sur elle-même’, in her own private corporeal space (‘sa chambre’ for Kristeva, ‘sous la table’ for Lambrichs) and she remains speechless.

²⁸⁹ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 83.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

From the outset of the novel Elise is presented as an oddity and is categorised as mentally handicapped, ‘débile’ (121), even without ‘cervelle’ (56). However, Elise is an instance of a character stuck in the world of the maternal, in the semiotic, to borrow Kristeva’s terminology. In *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, Kristeva discusses the concept of the abject and links it to the world of the maternal. According to psychoanalysis, the child must be able to identify and separate from his/her parents. However, the broken family environment deprives Elise of the possibility to identify with her parents and to separate from them: she is kept as an object of her parents, within their house (67), and inside their bed (64). The physical separation of the child from the mother that constitutes birth must be accompanied by psychic individuation from *le corps maternel* (to be read as the *world* of the maternal). It is described as ‘le dedans désirable et terrifiant, nourricier et meurtrier, fascinant et abject’.²⁹¹ But since Elise does not relate or identify with either of her parents, the necessary separation from the enticing maternal world is made more difficult. Kristeva writes,

Car, dans le ratage d’identification avec la mère comme avec le père, qu’est-ce qui leur reste pour se maintenir dans l’Autre? Sinon d’incorporer une mère dévorante, faute d’avoir pu l’introjecter, et de jouir de ce qui la manifeste, faute de pouvoir la signifier: urine, sang, sperme, excrément.²⁹²

Kristeva speaks of the incorporation of ‘une mère dévorante’ but in Lambrichs’s text the mother is described as rather detached and absent. I would suggest that amongst the violence and aggression of the family context, the mother is *experienced* by the child as the least harmful member of the parental couple. For Elise, her habitual protective retreats within herself are expressions of her withdrawal in the Semiotic; these are provoked by the urgency of her situation and consequently transform the maternal world as a vital dependency which, because of its necessity, ultimately becomes “devouring” for the subject. Inadvertently, the detached mother becomes ‘une mère dévorante’ for the daughter. Nonetheless, this refuge in the maternal is not to be equated with an identification with the mother. Elise does not integrate the *image* of the mother: this *introjection* is rendered impossible by the lack of identification with the present physical figure of the mother. Because she cannot signify the mother, the character can only ‘jouir de ce qui la manifeste’. The *jouissance* of ‘urine, sang, sperme, excrément’ indicates a blurred distinction between what is considered as acceptable behaviour and

²⁹¹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 66.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

what constitutes improper control of the corporeal by the proper self. This is abject – ‘ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte’²⁹³ – just as the maternal, and monsters, have always been related to the abject.²⁹⁴ Indeed,

L’abject nous confronte [...], et cette fois dans notre archéologie personnelle, à nos tentatives les plus anciennes de nous démarquer de l’entité *maternelle* avant même que d’ex-ister en dehors d’elle grâce à l’autonomie du langage. Démarquage violent et maladroit, toujours guetté par la rechute dans la dépendance d’un pouvoir aussi sécurisant qu’étouffant.²⁹⁵

Elise is trapped in the maternal sphere and cannot escape from it for several reasons. Firstly she does not relate to her parents (‘ratage d’identification’) and can only integrate the ‘abject maternal’; she is also removed from the outside (the Symbolic, which constitutes the counter balance to the Semiotic). Moreover, she does not belong to the Symbolic as she does not speak (she is still in the pre-linguistic stage of personal development). ‘[L’] entité maternelle’, like the abject, encompasses opposing notions – ‘un pouvoir aussi sécurisant qu’étouffant’ for the maternal; ‘L’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte’²⁹⁶ for the abject. To conclude, I have shown in this section that what Kristeva refers to as ‘l’auberge naturelle’²⁹⁷ functions on one level as a sanctuary for Elise; it will be my purpose in the next section to explore how it may also function as a cage for the subject.

4.2.4 *Dangerous immersions in the Semiotic: the birth of the monstrous*

In *Female Stories, Female Bodies*, Curti discusses the representation and understanding of the female womb, which I argue can be understood as a synecdoche for the maternal. She cites Freud:

the female womb, “the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning”; like the uncanny, these bodies are familiar – as they embody a return to something where each of us has been – and mysterious at the same time, representing that which cannot be known, or even looked at.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 12.

²⁹⁴ Shildrick, p. 45.

²⁹⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 20.

²⁹⁶ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, 12.

²⁹⁷ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 20.

²⁹⁸ Curti, p. 107.

Elise stands as one of ‘these bodies’. Elise also stands between the “natural” attraction to the maternal, and its impossible contemplation; she embodies the forbidden desire of abject absent dissociation. Elise embraces abjection and returns to maternal unity, to forget ‘à l’intérieur de soi le scalpel qui opère les séparations’.²⁹⁹ Kristeva writes about the subject ‘égaré’,

Car c’est de cet égarement en terrain exclu qu’il tire sa jouissance. Cet abject dont il ne cesse pas de se séparer est en somme, pour lui, une *terre d’oubli* constamment remémorée. Dans un temps effacé, l’abject a dû être pôle aimanté de convoitise.³⁰⁰

However, this attracting ‘pôle aimanté de convoitise’ could also be understood – when taken to its extreme of full possession of the individual, like in the case of Elise – as invading. When we ‘experience ourselves out-of-body’, Shildrick writes, we ‘either inhabit the body of another, or find our own bodies shared – invaded we would say – by another’.³⁰¹ ‘This is no small matter’, she explains, for ‘the well-defined boundaries of the body’ have been transgressed. Moreover, ‘invasion, either corporeal or psychic, is one of our greatest fears’.³⁰² And Barbara Creed concurs with my demonstration so far that ‘The possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed’.³⁰³ However, Shildrick wonders why ‘the maternal-foetal connection’ and the state of ‘sharing of bodies in pregnancy’ are objects of fear and rejection. She replies: ‘it is precisely that archaic link that constitutes the abject’.³⁰⁴ I argue that this link, and particularly in the case of Elise the immersion in the maternal, cannot be broken: as shown before, the dysfunctional family context of her upbringing renders impossible the identification/separation with both parents, and causes an instinctive retreat into the safe, yet stifling, world of the maternal. As an impossible vicious circle, this unbreakable link is provoked, and maintained, as I have argued above, by the character’s failed identification with the mother and impossible integration of her image, and its subsequent *jouissance* ‘de ce qui la manifeste [...] : urine, sang, sperme, excrément’.³⁰⁵ As Kristeva indicates, ‘la jouissance seule fait exister l’abject comme tel. On ne le connaît pas, on ne le désire pas, on en jouit.

²⁹⁹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 15.

³⁰⁰ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 16.

³⁰¹ Shildrick, p. 50.

³⁰² Shildrick, p. 137.

³⁰³ Creed, p. 32.

³⁰⁴ Shildrick, p. 137.

³⁰⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 66.

Violemment et avec douleur. Une passion'.³⁰⁶ The close inter-connection between abject, maternal, and jouissance reinforces the process of causality and almost annihilates the possibility of differentiation. A prisoner of this abominable triad, Elise is pictured as a monster. 'It is not that the monster represents the threat *of* difference', Shildrick explains, 'but that it threatens to interrupt difference – at least in its binary form – such that the comfortable otherness that secures the selfsame is lost'.³⁰⁷ Lambrichs's character is not dismissed as the absolute monster *of* difference, not even remotely connected to "us", but rather as the uncomfortable sibling who does not seem to belong.

Elise's ambiguous confinement in the maternal can only be a temporary refuge (representing both her escape from, and non-assimilation with, the outside) as it hinders the normal processes of separation leading to the formation of an independent subject. Her prolonged retreat in the world of the Semiotic is ultimately untenable because of its abject nature and because it leads to the eruption of the monstrous. Feminist critics have explored the special bond between mothers and daughters and seen in their tangled links a source of monstrosity.³⁰⁸ However, such a deduction is not entirely applicable in the case of Elise as it is not her bond with her *mother* (as an individual) but rather with the Semiotic that makes her abject, and later monstrous. Overall, the first mother-daughter relationship portrayed in *A ton image* can be described as a failure; Elise's mother does not provide her child protection and safety, nor the possibility to detach herself from the enticing Semiotic, and to become an independent subject. As I show next, this will awaken in the subject multiple antagonisms, affecting not only the subject's psychology, but also more visibly her body and her gestures.

4.2.5 Elise as hybrid and monstrous: between human distress and animal violence

My reading of Elise's difference has so far highlighted her alienation within her environment. Her mental deficiencies are reflected in her silence; however as I have shown, this mute confinement is the result of another constriction. The simultaneous lack of detachment and attempts to separate from the abject maternal world moreover

³⁰⁶ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 17.

³⁰⁷ Shildrick, p. 45.

³⁰⁸ See for instance, Jane Gallop, 'The Monster in the Mirror: The Feminist Critic's Psychoanalysis', in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 13-24; Marianne Hirsch, 'A Mother's Discourse: Incorporation and Repetition in *La Princesse de Clèves*', *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 67-87; Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976).

cause her yet more separation from her family context: symbolically, she has departed the realm of humanity. Kristeva notes that ‘L’abject nous confronte [...] à ces états fragiles où l’homme erre dans les territoires de l’*animal*’.³⁰⁹ Elise’s lot is that of an outcast, and her condition, animal; ‘[elle] erre dans les territoires de l’*animal*’ without actually being one, she embodies ‘l’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte’.³¹⁰ She is a hybrid being at the frontier between kingdoms (the human race and the animal kingdom), described by her brother as ‘ni fillette ni jeune fille, plutôt un être hybride, animal à visage humain quand la terreur n’en déformait pas les traits’ (56), which coincides with Kristeva’s identification of ‘un animal humain hautement altéré’.³¹¹

Elise however does not move freely between worlds; she is stuck in her own. Firstly, she often experiences a restriction of her physical space. The family keeps Elise inside the house, as a well-guarded, shameful family secret: Jean describes his sister as ‘le véritable objet de ma honte’ (116). Moreover, when the father shouts, ‘Elle a vu la porte, c’est tout, et elle va encore essayer d’en profiter pour filer dehors... Gare à toi si je t’y prends!’ (67), the symbolic locking of the door is reminiscent of her psychic enclosure. ‘Frontière sans doute’ Kristeva writes, ‘l’abjection est surtout ambiguïté. Parce que, tout en démarquant, elle ne détache pas radicalement le sujet de ce qui le menace – au contraire, elle l’avoue en perpétuel danger’.³¹² This indeed threatens Elise “from the inside” (the impossibility of standing apart from the maternal abject), and from the outside as danger also comes from her family surroundings. She is treated like a mere object and an animal. Jean testifies of his mother who ‘se pench[e] sous la table, attrapp[e] ma soeur par le bras et l’install[e] à sa place’ (56), and of his father’s insults, assaults and the incestuous relationship she has to endure. There is an impossible identification with the outside for Elise, and the young girl is torn between her state of enclosure and the impossible (even unrealistic) wish to escape. Instead, reflecting her treatment like an animal, Elise the hybrid character only finds comfort and security ‘blottie dans l’étable, cherchant auprès des bêtes une chaleur paisible qu’elle ne trouv[e] guère auprès des humains’ (57).

Her personality growing increasingly animalistic, she ultimately associates the outside world with pure aggression: ‘Supportant tant bien que mal son statut de chimère, elle avait compris que pour survivre, il fallait bouger le moins possible’ (57). In *Soleil noir*,

³⁰⁹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 20.

³¹⁰ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 12.

³¹¹ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 18.

³¹² Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 17.

Kristeva continues the analysis of her patient's behaviour. Generally apathetic, 'dans une passivité accablée, acéphale, immobile', Hélène, like Elise, can be prone to opposing sensations: 'Lorsque l'image d'un objet ou le visage d'une personne pavenaient à [se] cristalliser [dans son 'océan léthal'], ils étaient immédiatement perçus comme des précipités de haine, éléments blessants ou hostiles, désintégrants et angoissants, qu'elle ne pouvait affronter autrement qu'en les tuant'.³¹³ We read in *A ton image* similar attitudes from the part of Elise: 'Elise soudain se cambra et, les bras et le visage tendus vers le ciel, se mit à hurler de toutes ses forces' (58-59). Although aware of her punishment if she continues her tantrum ('Si tu veux qu'elle s'arrête', screams her father, 'y a qu'une chose à faire: la douche froide'), she continues:

Or, au lieu de se calmer, ses propres cris semblaient la galvaniser et ses membres, agités de mouvements incontrôlés, brusquement la déséquilibèrent et la jetèrent au sol où, tombant comme une masse, elle se cogna violemment la tête au pied de la table. (59)

Elise continually exhibits signs of aggression and violence towards others, and even herself. She oscillates between extreme states of brutality and also challenges her entourage, defying them.

Another episode in *A ton image* introduces Robert, the new farm boy who joins the family and is about to take his first meal with the family; the mother addresses him: 'Viens, dit-elle à Robert, installe-toi ici, ajouta-t-elle en lui désignant la chaise voisine de celle d'Elise.' Robert semblait pétrifié' (56). And immediately afterwards: "“Attention!” Au cri de Robert, je levai la tête. Elise consciencieusement lui versait son verre d'eau sur les genoux' (58). In *Soleil noir*, Kristeva transcribes her patient Hélène's account: 'Je fais tout et n'importe quoi, je suis l'homme, la femme, la bête, tout ce qu'on veut, cela épate les gens, et moi cela me faisait jouir, je crois, mais ce n'était pas vraiment moi. C'était agréable, mais c'était une autre'.³¹⁴ Here, in Shildrick's words, the subject 'experience[s] [herself] out-of-body'.³¹⁵ These habits are described by Kristeva as 'festins érotiques' and a '[t]riomphe narcissique et phallique'. In *A ton image*, Elise similarly exemplifies her power over her inhospitable entourage and her condition; in Kristeva's words, 'elle peut tout, la toute-puissance, c'est elle'.³¹⁶ Elise appears to be lacking control over her own body and limbs as she knocks herself out during a fit of anger and madness (59). With a tone of nervous fright, Jean describes his sister as

³¹³ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 84.

³¹⁴ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 88.

³¹⁵ Shildrick, p. 50.

³¹⁶ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 88.

sometimes ‘traversé[e] [...] par des émotions dont j’aurais souvent éprouvé l’extrême violence’ (56-57). Elise is also uncontrollable; her sudden fits of anger and her hybrid nature (here wild, there prostrated), recall Shildrick’s monsters, ‘deeply disturbing; [...] always liminal, refusing to stay in place, [...] and overturn[ing] the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject’.³¹⁷ Not quite a beast but treated as such, her oscillations between silence and explosions of violence embody the threat she poses to herself, to her entourage. In my next section, I will demonstrate that within her family Elise is regarded as a failed reproduction. To do so, I will turn to the theme of reproduction and explore how it has recently acquired the properties of a social institution. I will investigate how in the case of reproduction the imposition of norms creates stray subjects (Elise and Jean) often unable to match strict (parental) expectations. Indeed, while Elise’s monstrosity and overall difference foreshadow her status as a failed reproduction, I will demonstrate that Jean also fails to fulfill the predefined expectations set by his parents. The forms of rejection from his family that this character undergoes must be explored alongside Elise’s as they will play a crucial part in shaping his own vision of reproduction and pave the way to his ultimate transformation into a monster.

4.2.6 Reproduction as social institution, and children as successful or unsuccessful reproductions

In *Reproductive Genetics, Gender and the Body*, Elizabeth Ettorre associates reproduction with gender as concepts governing human interactions in our contemporary society. Indeed, she explains, ‘Traditionally, gender has been viewed as society’s expectation concerning behaviour viewed as appropriate for members of each sex, male and female’. Ettorre continues,

similar to gender, reproduction as a component of culture is exhibiting signs of a social institution. As reproduction ascends as a social institution, it develops into a regulatory system, focused on the replication of bodies which must exemplify completeness (i.e. organs, limbs, torso, crania filled with brains, etc.), health, well-being, individual potential and future welfare. Reproduction represents an organisation of values, norms, activities and social relations that symbolise notions of able-bodiedness, human survival, progress and individual potential.³¹⁸

³¹⁷ Shildrick, p. 4.

³¹⁸ Elizabeth Ettorre, *Reproductive Genetics, Gender and the Body* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

Ettorre's explanation of the functioning of reproduction reveals the institutional arrangements characteristic of Foucauldian theory: the reproducing individuals and the offspring are therefore subjected to disciplinary corporeal and behavioural norms. Indeed as Ettorre writes, 'reproduction is a normative, standardising system, which disciplines, controls and scrutinises the actions of procreative bodies, both male and female'.³¹⁹ The rules described by Ettorre reach beyond the reproducing subject to the results of reproduction: the children to be born equally are the focus of control and surveillance. As I have argued in previous chapters, we are witnessing the surveillance of all bodies – the reproducing bodies (mostly women's), and those to be born. I will explore more specifically the case of the reproducing subject (via the character of Françoise) in my next part; here, however, my concern is to determine how the rules of reproduction impact on the children and their place in the Letertre family.

I shall focus first on Elise, who does not illustrate any of the requirements cited above by Ettorre, and whom I posit as a failed reproduction. She does not 'exemplify completeness' such as 'crania filled with brains' – her father describes Elise as 'une gamine à qui l'bon Dieu a juste oublié de donner de la cervelle' (56). As far as mental health and well-being are concerned, what is stressed by her family is Elise's inaptitude to meet standards of normality – she is deemed 'débile' (121) by her own mother, whilst in fact Elise is a victim of dysfunctional parenting. Finally, as a monstrous subject, her 'individual potential and future welfare' are indeed greatly affected by her overall condition. In Ettorre's longer quote cited above, the use of the phrase 'replication of bodies' indicates a "focus" on continuity from the part of the genitors. The results of a successful reproduction must be in the image of their creator. When Elise's mother explains, 'Moi j'ai bien fait une débile et pourtant, je suis pas débile...' (121), she defines her daughter as a failed reproduction, not in the image of her creators, and mentally retarded; moreover it is this last element (her handicap, affecting her behaviour) that will prove the main cause of Elise's reproductive failure. As the next section will reveal, the focus here is not strictly on physical resemblance but more on personality, as there are clear expectations regarding the future (and function) of their children in the Letertre household.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

Shildrick informs us that since the Renaissance, reproduction has been concerned with ‘the repetition of masculinist ideals of selfsameness [... and] the paternal principle’.³²⁰ I explore Lambrichs’s interpretation of these age-old ideals and the paternal principle, by analysing in the Letertre family the importance of the children’s abilities to fulfil predetermined functions.

I begin in this section with Jean, the first-born son who, in the light of his sister’s monstrosity and shortcomings, should be (it would seem) the prodigal son. One of the first elements we learn about Jean is his self-confessed desire to become a doctor (51), immediately followed by the avowed peculiarity of his ambition – ‘Il est vrai que rien, dans mon entourage, ne me prédisposait à cette carrière’ (51) – and the father’s disappointment – ‘mon père, agriculteur et éleveur en Normandie, eût certes préféré me voir embrasser celle de vétérinaire, qui lui eût au moins été de quelque utilité’ (51-52). If Jean does not strictly follow in the paternal path, his locally-reputed academic achievements as well as the prospect of a prestigious profession reflect positively on the father and do him proud: Jean notes concerning his father, ‘l’idée d’avoir un fils médecin, mon Dieu, ne lui déplaisait guère’ (52). When he comes back some years later as a qualified doctor, and accompanies his mother to the village market and meets again old acquaintances, his mother is (in Jean’s words) ‘fière comme jamais’ (298). Therefore, in spite of a profession disconnected with the family business, it still seems for Jean to be a successful decision as he keeps his parents satisfied. From the parents’ perspective, they find other methods to maintain their power over their son. They establish new rules which, if they do not strictly translate the parents’ expectations for reproduction (Jean chooses medicine over farming), still enable the continuation of parental ascendancy. Firstly, his mother arranges for his accommodation in Paris ‘par l’entremise d’une vague connaissance’ (52-53). Then, in the father’s last words of advice before leaving for Paris – ‘mon père me conseilla de réussir’ (66) – Jean immediately understands the consequences of potential failure: ‘le retour définitif à la ferme’ (66). Jean is displaced from one enclosed environment to another (and as I explore later from one constricting function to the next – from son to husband and prospective father – with comparable measures of pressure to succeed in each); as a medical student, he even confesses his impression to be working hard solely for his parents’ satisfaction and pride (81). Despite all this, disciplined Jean docilely remains under the yoke of his parents and meets their requirements. Even so, I would argue that

³²⁰ Shildrick, p. 31.

he still falls short of their concept of a fully successful reproduction because Jean fails to illustrate, in Shildrick's words 'the repetition of masculinist ideals of selfsameness [... and] the paternal principle'.³²¹ However boastful the parents are of Jean's prowess, this can never amount to the satisfaction of securing filial succession of the family's agrarian legacy. As Jean fails to fulfill the expected function of a successful reproduction, they recruit a new farm boy. In the subsequent father's justification (almost to himself) – 'Puisque *mon fils me quitte*, il faut bien que je trouve de l'aide ailleurs, non?' (56, my emphasis) – the father expresses his sadness for Jean's anticipated departure, and also for the loss of his son and "genetic" succession. Moreover, it is also possible to read the father's realisation that the failures in reproduction might concern not only the offspring (Jean), but also himself, as the enterprise of reproduction here seems to have failed. Robert symbolically represents another attempt at a successful reproduction. He is introduced to Jean by the father: 'je te présente Robert. Ton successeur' (56). The young boy rapidly grows into his new role and becomes the spitting image of Jean's father, but he is not presented as the physical mirror image of Jean's father but rather as his alter ego (Robert also later shares a strong bond with his own son). Indeed, the two men share the same roof and the same professional activity, they dine at the same table, they share the same crude and vulgar humour (119), the same taste for illegal sporting activities (122), and they even share Elise (the father is, after all, the first to suggest Elise's "favours" to Robert just as he is about to take his first meal with the family (57-58)). Robert occupies the place left vacant by Jean and embodies the image of the successful (replacement) son; as he evolves from farm boy to son-in-law (marrying Elise) he definitely dethrones Jean and becomes the unique heir to the Letertre estate. Jean speaks of Robert as 'qui plus que moi eût pu être le fils de mon père' (232). Despite his revolt in front of his unexpected replacement, Jean is ultimately able to choose for himself his own path and to 'quitter ces lieux au plus vite; ces lieux où chacun n'occupait sa place qu'à titre provisoire puisque tout le monde, apparemment, y était interchangeable' (58). Through his unhappy childhood experiences, Jean ultimately learns that parents can impose onto their children their own desires, and define for them paths that may run counter to the children's own individuality and predispositions. Even if Jean strays from his father's professional path, and in spite of his indignation when faced with his sister's treatment, I will later show that he reproduces mistakes comparable to his father's, and that his

³²¹ Shildrick, p. 31.

upbringing will greatly affect his own (unconscious) desire to counter his own childhood unhappiness.

In the final sections, I will show that in addition to being regarded as a failed reproduction by her parents, for Jean, Elise also fails to fill in the part of the sister. In their own individual ways, both the parents and the brother fail to respect Elise's individuality and accept her difference, and they attempt to change her; they will try to reassign her to a different role, and even to cure her condition. As it will be revealed, contrary to Jean, Elise's new functions let us envisage little liberation of the subject; instead, she remains confined within the boundaries of the farm and her life, as well as her body, remain the sole property of her family members.

4.2.7 *A new role for Elise?*

The issue underpinning the title/question of this section is whether the monstrous subject can at all be designated a role and a place. Elise is a character who is always depicted out of place (in the barn, under the table, in the parental bed); in fact, this is because in her family she is not given her own place which, as a human subject, she deserves. The exploration of her psychic development has revealed her confinement in the maternal object, which is also symptomatic of a subject struggling to find her place in relation with others. Perhaps paradoxically to her apparent immobility and passivity, Elise is the embodiment of the monstrous figure in a constant state of displacement, who does not belong to any world it borders. In my previous chapters I have explored forms of rejection of the monstrous individual by the disciplinary institution and within society. Here Lambrichs explores the inability to fully reject the monstrous, not by the subject him/herself (like Irène), but rather by his/her surrounding. This is exemplified via the figure of the monstrous sibling: Elise's rejection is not expressed via geographical exclusion (instead she is confined to the farm) but rather it takes the form of complete disregard of her human status and human rights (her family possesses her life and body). As she fails to meet the criteria of the successful reproduction, her family attempts to reassign her to a different position. These decisions can be made by them because no consideration is made of her individual wishes (she is not regarded as a person, she is a monstrous subject), and because Elise, treated as a mere object, "belongs" to her family.

In *Reproductions of Reproduction* Judith Roof suggests that the status of the child can be paralleled with that of an item of private property. Whilst she explains that

offspring permit the protection and the continuation of patriarchal social relations,³²² this cannot be exemplified by Elise as she is a failed reproduction. Instead, parental ownership of the offspring is expressed differently; in *A ton image* we observe the manipulation of the monstrous subject's body (here with Elise, and later with France). Elise endures childhood incest, which greatly troubles her psychosexual development. Her mother however only sees Elise's unguarded sexuality (with Robert and several other 'amants attirés' (120)) as Elise's personal satisfaction of her own wild sexual appetite: 'C'est qu'elle a le feu où je pense, la garce' (120), remarks her mother. It therefore provides the excuse to justify the prostitution of her daughter: 'Parce que faudrait pas croire, c'est elle qui va les chercher!' (120). Indeed, to Jean's stupefaction, 'En échange de ces services particuliers mes parents percevaient, en toute bonne conscience apparemment, un salaire qui à leurs yeux les dédomageait de cette bouche à nourrir' (120).

Moreover, the exploitation of Elise's body extends to the control of her reproductive function: she is given no contraception (121) and undergoes miscarriages (289). Decisions are made concerning Elise's life to satisfy the family's desire for grandchildren: 'Elle pourrait peut-être *nous* faire un beau petit' (121, my emphasis). Yet again no consideration is taken as of Elise's wish or even her ability to become a mother as, in a sense, the child would not be (totally) considered as hers; Jean reports his mother's words: 'Et l'enfant, s'il y en a un, *on l'élèvera*' (121, my emphasis) This could be understood as an indirect go at producing a successful reproduction, only through Elise this time, who would be performing differently her family's attempt at securing the 'immortality of the social order', which encompasses the passing on of family genes and one's genetic heritage.³²³ Jean is not a successful reproduction himself but his replacement by Robert fills in the place he was expected to occupy, which eventually amounts to a successful result for the parents. Similarly with Elise, if her own predispositions prevent her from filling in her role as successful daughter herself, her parents (who possess her) allow themselves another try by having her produce an heir. Elise's episodes of procreation demonstrate that she simultaneously manages a successful and an unsuccessful reproduction. As she gives birth to twins, interestingly, only the male child survives and Gyhère becomes the spitting image of his father (286-90). For Robert and Elise's parents, Gyhère is the desired male heir to the family, and

³²² Judith Roof, *Reproductions of Reproduction: Imaging Symbolic Change* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 107-12.

³²³ Roof, p. 109.

therefore a successful reproduction. However, this is annulled as both Elise and Gyhère die, and the mysterious conditions of their deaths by drowning in a nearby pond (308-309) leave open the possibility of suicide (304). This episode points to the (mental and physical) fragility of the monstrous subject, Elise, and also to the limits of the monster's ability to comply, or the monster's subjugation, to a predefined role. The parents are ultimately unsuccessful when attempting to make Elise fit to their mould, when assigning predefined roles to her, because they fail to come to terms with the differences and limitations which compose her individual identity. Her monstrosity is the expression of her individuality, it speaks of her dysfunctional upbringing, of her alienation with her family context, and through the ultimate fatalities (monstrous filicide and suicide?), it may be the expression of her ultimate revolt against the shackles of reproduction.

If Elise fails to be a successful reproduction for her parents, similarly she is not the sister Jean wished for. He sadly confesses to ignoring her for years (62), and is ashamed to admit that the family dog Gordon replaced her (80). Indeed when Jean laid eyes on newborn Elise for the first time, we read, 'Aussi en conclus-je, [...] que l'affaire avait raté'. For Jean the child, this is a failure because of physical dissimilarity. But Jean deplores the subsequent exhibition of yet more of his sister's differences: 'Et la suite des événements ne m'avait pas détrompé' (58). The day before Jean leaves to begin his medical studies, he writes 'Espérais-je encore la guérir et *faire d'elle* la compagne dont j'avais rêvé [...]?' (58, my emphasis). Elise has never fulfilled the function of sister but Jean sees in medicine the potential to cure her, to change her, so that she meets his expectations of what defines, according to him, a successful/good sister: 'Elise! Est-ce son malheur qui m'orientait maintenant vers la médecine?' (58). Furthermore, this medical "corrective" treatment can also be interpreted as a desire to readjust unacceptable differences. Not regarded as fully human, and not a beast either, the correction of her shortcomings seeks to vanquish this state of uncomfortable middle ground, and reinstall her within our contemporary binary system of classification, as a full member in her family. As Shildrick indicates, 'What disturbs is that for all that it is extra-ordinary and widely characterised as unnatural, the monster is not outside nature'.³²⁴ However, Sawicki warns the reader about 'the danger that medical solutions

³²⁴ Shildrick, p. 10.

will become the only ones and that other ways of defining them will be eclipsed'.³²⁵ As I explore later through the case of Françoise's sterility, the over-medicalisation of our contemporary society installs the physical body as the focus of all kinds of pressure, as responsible for contemporary paradigms of living (acceptance/rejection; success/failure; good/evil; normal/abnormal). Jean reduces his sister's 'malheur' to a curable condition, as a problem that can be solved with science, and fails to fully consider the role played by her family members and the conditions of her up-bringing. Indeed Sawicki reminds us that 'there may be better solutions; and there may be better ways of defining the problems'.³²⁶ Finally, I shall propose one last interpretation of Jean's desire to cure his sister, which will provide the context to understand Jean's vision of science as a useful and empowering tool. Jean regrets his systematic lack of help and intervention with Elise, his parents' "object". His perceived childhood cowardice is later compensated by the power bestowed by his knowledge and profession: medicine would allow him to act in favour of Elise, and symbolically against them. It would thus seem that the access to medical knowledge allows Jean to defy paternal authority and regressive countryside attitudes, to break free from parental hold and even childhood traumas. However, my exploration of his relationship with the character France will reveal his unbroken ties with his family. Despite reducing his parents' motives for reproducing to those of a cow (63), Jean will also be guided by basic and personal desires when considering reproduction, and (unconsciously) focus on the function determined for the child. Just as his parents did with Elise, he will create a child and a monstrous subject, except that he will resort to science to obtain his reproductive desire, and to carry out body manipulations. But as he ultimately repeats and exceeds all the parenting failures of which his parents could be accused, the question that will remain is: who is the monster in Lambrichs's story?

4.3 France: cloning to ensure a successful reproduction

My exploration of reproduction as an event in the human lifespan where monstrous shapes might emerge has so far focused on the offspring born of reproductions preloaded with specific parental expectations. Similarly in this section, I will

³²⁵ Jana Sawicki, 'Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies' in *Feminist Theory of the Body*, ed. by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick pp. 190-202 (p. 194).

³²⁶ Ibid.

concentrate upon the character of France to demonstrate that, as was the case with Elise, the crux to a successful reproduction lies in the child's ability to fulfil a predetermined function. Although the clone embodies both scientific breakthrough and the successful result of a highly controlled reproduction, I will expose the paradox contained within this instance of reproduction and which the figure of the clone exposes. Indeed, France's ultimate inability to match parental reproductive expectations will in fact reveal her genitors' mistakes, and the initial failure to grant her a place as a human being without a restriction on her life potential. She will also be the victim of her parents' own sufferings and their own troubles with reproduction. Before the results of reproduction can be evaluated, it is first of all necessary to explore what motivates reproduction, what makes it appear as essential and as a solution for Jean and Françoise. To this end, I investigate how reproducing individuals are subjected to reproduction's disciplinary system and how in turn they subject their own offspring to a further level of objectification. As the analysis will demonstrate, Lambrichs's story and its multifarious monsters point to the limits of the controllability of reproduction, and of the human body: to seek to fully control a human event (reproduction) which is defined by its transformative and creative nature, can only lead to the alienation of "inapt" individuals.

In the first part of this chapter, I explored how Elise becomes a monstrous subject because of her dysfunctional family context. Elise is indeed a monstrous sibling and a failed reproduction, but as has been previously highlighted, as a child her status is comparable to that of an item of private property, which grants her parents the "right" to control her body and her life. Jean is appalled by the abuse of his sister and pities her condition, but he limits her 'malheur' to a condition that medicine could have cured – thus transforming her into the sister he expected to have, and by extension a successful reproduction – enabling the positive outcome of reproduction, and ultimately a happy family. In his adult life, Jean is confronted with a situation of reproductive difficulty on which, he believes, the very survival of his marriage depends. As my analysis will show, Jean's "courageous" decision to resort to science to resolve his wife's reproductive limitations can be read as his own (delayed) revenge against his past cowardice and (medical) ignorance. It also testifies to his desire to repair the wrongs of his childhood dysfunctional family context, and maybe to show that despite being seen as a failed son, he can become, contrary to his father, a successful father in his own right.

4.3.1 *A new start and a new role for Jean*

Jean's departure for Paris represents for the eighteen-year old the chance to flee his past and offers the possibility of turning a new page in his life: Jean wishes to 'non seulement partir mais, si possible, oublier' (66). He seeks to leave behind the traumas of his dysfunctional family context and his native Normandy countryside to become an educated city-dweller. This is also the end of Jean's childhood and the beginning of his emancipation; Jean decodes a note of emotion in his mother's voice as 'Car même si je devais revenir, ne fût-ce que pour les vacances, ce ne serait plus jamais la même chose' (66). Despite feeling 'égaré, lamentable' and 'sans repères' when he first sets foot in Paris (74), both the terrifying thought of returning home and his own motivation in his studies drive Jean to quickly start a new existence. The new Parisian home environment – in total contrast with previous family life – greatly assist Jean's integration in his new role. As his parents are unable to afford the rent for independent accommodation (52), his mother finds 'une chambre [...] chez une veuve respectable [...] qui vivait seule et serait heureuse d'accueillir chez elle un étudiant sérieux' (53). Jean meets Françoise Bourgeois on his first day in Paris, and becomes her lodger. The widow is described in the novel as discreet but caring for Jean. They rarely talk or meet but the narrator notes 'elle s'inquiétait de savoir si je ne manquais de rien puis, une fois rassurée, prenait discrètement congé' (75). She prepares his meals and does his laundry (75-6). The medical studies are absorbing; Jean dedicates all his time to working and denies his social life. However, Jean confesses, 'je ne conserve pas le souvenir, curieusement, d'avoir souffert de la solitude. Je n'avais pas, en fait, le sentiment, d'être seul'. He explains further: 'La présence discrète de Françoise Bourgeois, les attentions qu'elle avait pour moi en mon absence [...] me donnaient au contraire l'impression d'être entouré et soutenu comme je ne l'avais jamais été' (76). Françoise is an excellent and dedicated hostess; she provides Jean with a perfect working environment (comfortable surroundings, material everyday necessities), attending to all his needs while at the same giving him enough personal space to avoid stifling him.

Gradually, Jean gets to know Françoise and evolves from lodger to confidant; the beginning of their involvement may be situated the moment when she shares with him the story of her past sufferings. In *Soleil noir*, Kristeva writes: 'La dépression féminine se cache parfois sous une activité fébrile qui donne à la déprimée l'apparence d'une

femme pratique bien à l'aise et qui ne pense qu'à se dévouer'.³²⁷ Only Françoise's mourning (74) points to an unknown wound. Françoise confides the details of her grievous past after a prolonged conversation with her lodger who has abridged his summer holidays with his family (83-86). She recounts the recent deaths of her husband and two sons in a car accident (86), and the extent of her despair, so well concealed up to this moment, is revealed through the fluctuations of her voice and her 'visage mouillé de larmes' (86). Jean is put face to face with Françoise's emotional state as she leads him to an unknown part of her flat (her private space). He writes,

La chambre dans laquelle je pénétrai, ébloui par la lumière crue tombant d'une ampoule nue, était entièrement vide. Seul le papier peint, illustré de nuages et de Pères Noël se répétant à l'infini, disait qu'il s'agissait d'une chambre d'enfant. (86)

This unfurnished room symbolises Françoise's (feeling of) emptiness. The 'ampoule nue' produces a blinding 'lumière crue' which indeed signifies life, as opposed to darkness and death, but the use of the two adjectives 'nue' and 'crue' stresses the blankness of the space and points to an apathetic existence. This room is 'entièrement vide', devoid of people (of children) and life; only the wallpaper indicates this used to be a children's room, and signifies the past presence of children. And Françoise immediately comments on the room, 'Voilà dans quel état sont mes rêves [...], tous mes rêves. Pendant des années ils ont été là, entre ces quatre murs. Et maintenant...' (86). It is the revelation of a blank topological and internal space: the exposure of the sheer emptiness of the room uncovers the state of Françoise's dreams. 'Pendant des années ils ont été là, entre ces quatre murs', she confides. She locates her (past) dreams in this room; this space, which used to contain her dreams, was also her children's room. This associates her children with Françoise's dreams. Their death has made them absent from the room, and destroyed their mother's dreams. Françoise recounts, 'j'ai appelé les services de la mairie pour faire débarrasser cette chambre'. The lack of furniture reinforces the feeling of emptiness. She continues, 'Ils ont pris tous les meubles. Les lits gigognes, les deux petites tables, tous les jouets. C'est là que dormaient mes deux fils, Victor et Antoine' (86).

Greater still than following the accident itself, Françoise's dreams are now eternally gone. She concurs,

³²⁷ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 91.

Depuis, je n'ai plus rien rêvé, plus rien aimé, plus rien désiré. Jusqu'à ce soir. Oui, [...] ce soir tu m'as fait rêver. Et tu m'as rendu confiance en l'avenir. Merci. (86)

Their casual discussion about Jean's studies (just before the revelation of Françoise's past life) is a breath of fresh air for her. Jean has high ambitions, 'Mes études de médecine terminées, je me lancerais dans la recherche, découvrirais de nouveaux remèdes, sauverais des milliers de vies. Des milliers de vies' (84). Thanks to Jean's impassioned speech on the extraordinary progress of medical sciences, she experiences dreams again. Françoise's awoken trust in the future also revives the shadowy presence of her children. 'Il y a tant à faire, tant à découvrir, à inventer...', says Jean. He explains further,

Tenez, dis-je en rapprochant mon tabouret du sien comme pour mieux lui communiquer mon enthousiasme, savez-vous qu'en un siècle, nous avons trouvé plus de remèdes efficaces contre la mort que depuis les origines de l'humanité? (84)

Jean's avowed devotion for science and the revelation of its promising future open new horizons for Françoise: that of being able to prevent death (while the death of her own children could not be prevented). The return of the dream means a return to the possibility of having children. Jean continues,

Imaginez les progrès possibles... Prolonger la vie, la jeunesse, créer la vie, même – pourquoi pas créer une vie sans maladies? Si vous saviez tout ce que j'imagine, quand je me laisse aller à rêver... (84)

Jean, the narrator in *A ton image*, records his passionate monologue and concludes it with the actual limitations of sciences, but nonetheless he expresses his trust in the future: 'Comment [la science] ne nous réserverait-elle pas encore d'incroyables surprises? Il suffit de le vouloir, de chercher, de travailler...' (85). The young student's flights of fancy enable Françoise to go back in time (and contemplate her children/dreams again). In an unconscious echo of their own wishes, Jean unknowingly foretells his own determination and he hypothesises: 'Pourquoi demain ne serions-nous pas capables [...] de remonter le temps biologique' (85; my emphasis).

4.3.2 Scientific responsibility: providing cures

Jean's relationship with Françoise evolves, and his role shifts from the position of lodger, to confidant, and finally to partner. His emotional and then romantic

involvement with Françoise goes alongside an involvement with her past. The traumas of her past have overflowed into her present and the pain caused by the loss of her family has shaped her present identity; similarly, the hopes brought about by Jean's trust in science have begun to change Françoise. As a partner, but also in his quality as a medical practitioner, Françoise's problems become his personal responsibility and professional challenge. As explored before through the case of his sister, Jean sees in medicine the potential to provide a cure, a solution, to other psychological difficulties. Françoise's depression presents Jean with a scientific challenge and he does not investigate other options to soothe his wife's psychological pains.

In *Soleil noir*, Kristeva recounts the story of a mother, and writes,

Isabelle a décidé d'avoir un enfant au moment le plus sombre d'une de ses périodes dépressives, [...] elle voulait avoir son enfant "pour elle-même". Peu lui importait de savoir de qui était cet enfant. "J'ai envie de l'enfant, pas de son père", réfléchissait cette "vierge-mère". Il lui fallait un "compagnon sûr": "Quelqu'un qui aurait besoin de moi, avec lequel on serait complice, on ne se quitterait jamais, enfin, presque..."³²⁸

Similarly for Kristeva's patient and Lambrichs's character, the end of the tunnel (of depression) is lit by the potential of pregnancy. As I showed, Jean revives Françoise's hopes with his discourse on the empowerments of science, which simultaneously allows Françoise to dream again (and metaphorically to envisage having another child). The projection into childbearing permits Françoise to unveil the truth about her past to Jean (through the showing of the empty room) and to metaphorically leave her past behind. The child Françoise aspires for is a solution to her psychological problems; like Isabelle's desired child, it is a cure 'pour elle-même'.

Furthermore to the recovered dreams, hopes and potential maternity, Françoise expresses the urge for an actual pregnancy: this is where Jean begins his role as a scientist and provider of a solution. As she first fears she may be sterile, Jean sees his wife 'désorientée prononçant ces mots d'une voix atone, Françoise inquiète et défaite à la fois' (131), and describes 'son regard où menaçaient de s'effondrer ses rêves' (131). Her physical and psychological health soon decline and she enters a phase of 'dépression alarmante' (135). Indeed Jean concludes, 'une seule chose pouvait la sortir de cet accès de profonde mélancolie et la sauver: avoir un enfant' (136). From the outset

³²⁸ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 100.

of their lives as parents, reproduction is presented as a provider of solutions to their own problems; the unborn (unconceived) child is already posited as an object through which a solution can be mediated. Jean understands the necessity for his wife to procreate and reassures her: ‘Si je trouvais une solution, disons, technique, pour que tu aies un enfant bien à toi...’ (140). This solution/child/cure subsequently becomes an *object* with which the mother cannot part; just as Jean and Elise are described as belonging to their parents (59; 81), the status of France will also be comparable to that of an item of private property.

To fulfil its role of cure, the child must come from the mother: it certainly cannot be an adopted child; it cannot originate from a donated ovum. Following Kristeva’s analysis, Françoise is indeed an instance of ‘une vierge mère’³²⁹ as her daughter France is not the product of a natural reproduction (which precludes the necessity of the sexual act of reproduction). She further denies the father’s part via the confessed absence of desire for the man (similarly illustrated by Kristeva’s patient who confesses ‘J’ai envie de l’enfant, pas de son père’), as well as the avowal of his genetic insignificance (Jean explains that Françoise refuses ‘un don d’embryon ou même [...] un don d’ovule, qui pourrait être fécondé par mon sperme’ (136)). Françoise dismisses the reproductive technologies that both her husband and her gynaecologists suggest (148) and Jean notes, ‘à ma grande surprise, elle repoussa tout de suite ces solutions avec horreur. Comme si l’idée de porter un enfant qui n’aurait rien eu d’elle la révoltait’ (136-37). In a nutshell, the child that Françoise desires must be hers because she wants it “for herself”; for Jean, the child represents his solution to keep his wife and his marriage. This child therefore also becomes an object for Jean as well as a scientific challenge. I would argue that Jean envisages the successful creation of a child as the acquisition of an item of private property, created by him and for his wife and himself, omitting to take into consideration the creation of an independent human life.

Jean eventually resorts to ‘nouvelles techniques expérimentales qui devraient lui permettre d’avoir un enfant qui lui ressemble’ (149-50) and that would secure her a ‘compagnon sûr’, ‘[un] complice’. As Kristeva indicates, ‘L’enfant antidote de la dépression est destiné à porter une lourde charge’.³³⁰ Indeed as her clone, her “daughter” France is constricted throughout her life in roles that have been attributed to her previous to her birth. She is ‘[I]’enfant antidote’ and Françoise’s cure; a scientific breakthrough and Jean’s recovered embodiment of his wife. In this respect, France will

³²⁹ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 99.

³³⁰ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 100.

be the product of a successful reproduction. Similarly, she will provide Françoise with a ‘compagnon sûr’. For Jean, his sister is considered by his family as a failed reproduction partly because of a (mental) condition that science could have solved. Overall, Elise’s and Françoise’s conditions, although very different in nature, are both regarded by Jean as bodily limitations which science can correct. In the case of Françoise, the risk of a failed reproduction and the inability to produce a ‘compagnon sûr’ is eliminated by the recourse to science which enables Françoise to conceive (‘un compagnon’), and to have child of her own (‘un compagnon sûr’). Jean’s pathologisation of a psychological problem and emotional trauma testify to his own past and his family’s views on reproduction. Reproduction as a solution to Françoise’s problem locks her child in a predefined role (as a cure); moreover, as I explore next, the inter-relationship between child/cure and pregnancy/lack of depression similarly confines Françoise in a role out of which she cannot picture herself.

4.3.3 Reproduction: control and objectification of individuals

Ettorre argues that reproduction displays the properties of a social institution, which imposes expectations on members of each sex. Similarly to self-disciplined subjects in a disciplinary institution, these docile individuals apply not only onto themselves but also on others and on their offspring the expectations set by reproduction. In this section, I explore first Françoise’s inability to envisage another role for herself but that of a mother. This posits her future child not only as her cure but also as a response to counter the social alienation provoked by her sterility. Indeed, I then go on to show that the child provides a solution to both parents, individually and as a couple, and also reveals in the case of Jean the legacy of a dysfunctional childhood environment.

In *A ton image*, cloning is utilised to counter natural procreative incapacity. For Sawicki, reproductive technologies are ‘disciplinary technologies’ with ‘controlling functions’ which ‘attach[...] women to their identities as mothers’.³³¹ The recourse to cloning as a reproductive technology, and the place of the clone as a therapeutic solution (Sawicki’s ‘specific kin[d] of solution[n]’) reinforce Françoise’s identity as a mother. The recent diagnosis of her sterility (135) metaphorically propels her away from her circle as she cannot fulfil the role of the wife-mother. Her health gradually

³³¹ Sawicki, ‘Disciplining mothers’, p. 194.

degrades in the early days of her menopause, and her parents, who never liked her new husband, seize the opportunity to extract her from her environment. She is taken to a clinic to rest; Jean soon obtains the authorisation to take her back home. Although slightly ashamed with her own consent to enter the clinic, she confesses to her husband: ‘J’ai si peur de te perdre, Jean, si peur... tu comprends?’ (147). Her inability to procreate and to be a mother, and her fear of losing Jean/her place, pushed her to remove herself from the environment in which she had no function. Reproduction can be explored following the precepts of Foucauldian theory that I have utilised in my chapters so far: it confers subjects a role, a place (location), and envisages the exclusion if the rules are not matched. Françoise’s brief seclusion at the clinic symbolically represents the potential alienation – from the self (I am not a mother; therefore I am a nobody); from the family; from the society of normal healthy individuals – caused by her sterility. Moreover the refuge at the clinic reinforces the medicalisation of sterility and the refusal (inability) to accept her condition. Françoise is ready to accept anything to correct her case when Jean first advances the possibility of a “technical” solution. (140). She does not tremble before the risks which are lesser than those of rejection if her sterility is definitely confirmed.

The consideration of any scientific technique – summed up in Françoise’s words to Jean as ‘Tout ce que tu veux. Tout ce qui est possible’ (140) – expresses the desperation for the desired reproduction, and illustrates a new instance of bodily manipulation. The mother offers her body and her life, and by proxy those of her child, for the accomplishment of her own wishes. However, it is not only Françoise but of course also Jean who views cloning (and the “object” produced by the technique) as a favourable solution to their problems. The newly discovered sterility profoundly affects Françoise and impacts on her behaviour with Jean and overall physical state. Jean does not tolerate the modifications nor does he recognise his wife anymore (135-36): he is compelled to find a solution to restore her to ‘son état normal’ (137). Following a consultation with Françoise, Michel Cardoze (his superior and fellow gynaecologist) discusses her case with Jean, and confesses: ‘elle me semble très attachée à vous mais elle vous quittera – par peur sans doute que vous la quittiez plus tard – si elle ne peut avoir un enfant de vous... ou d’elle’ (148). In Jean’s narrative, the Letertre couple and marriage depend on the ability of Françoise to fulfil her role as a genitor/mother, and on Jean to provide a medical solution. As anticipated, the child continues to occupy a central position in the perpetuation of Jean and Françoise’s existences. Jean later confesses that ‘Depuis la

naissance de France, mes relations avec Françoise se sont modifiées, à la fois apaisées et étoffées'. If this change in attitudes, felt as 'cette évolution comme naturelle' (255) affects both parents and seems unalarming, what might raise the reader's concern is that France becomes indispensable to the couple, both as individual members, and for their interactions. Jean writes that, 'Désormais, tout ce que nous partageons passe par France' (256).

In *A ton image*, Lambrichs exposes the individual motivations and dangerous consequences lying at the basis of reproduction. Nowhere more blatantly than with cloning and the multiple manipulations it requires is reproduction presented as a selfish enterprise. Jean consents to clone his wife against her knowledge, and is congratulated by Cardoze for his courage. But Jean reacts:

Courageux? En quoi le courage intervenait-il dans ma décision? Je savais bien dans mon for intérieur que si je me lançais dans cette aventure, *c'était uniquement par peur de perdre ma femme* et parce que j'espérais, saisissant cette occasion ultime, éviter une séparation pour moi catastrophique. Mais le vrai courage n'eût-il pas consisté au contraire à renoncer à ce projet? à affronter la réalité et le désespoir de Françoise? (164; my emphasis)

The selfishness lying at the basis of the cloning project is revolting because it is not fully posited as a reproductive method utilised to make Françoise a happy mother/person once again; it is not born either of the individual desire to perpetuate one's (genetic) heritage. Reproduction is used by Jean to avert the loss of his wife and as such, it will create a monstrous subject. It moreover reveals Jean's own complexes and his troubles with reproduction. He is unable to soothe his wife's distress and to extract her from the paradigm woman-wife-mother. Similarly, he is confined to a role; he considers himself (partly) responsible for their failure to procreate. In a dream where the inconsolable Françoise has just given birth to a plastic doll, 'une poupée morte' (133), Jean's (now deceased) father appears and calls his son 'un incapable!' (133). This reminds him of his failure as a son, to which he adds his 'double culpabilité de jeune mari et de spécialiste, incapable en effet de faire un enfant ou tout au moins de trouver la juste réponse et la solution adéquate au problème soulevé par la stérilité temporaire de Françoise' (134).

For Jean, cloning enables him to create and control a scientific object. Firstly, medicine can ensure that the child meets the requirements of normality, which also

compose those of a successful reproduction described by Ettorre.³³² In the Preface to *A ton image* Lambrichs writes that with the recent pathologisation of sterility ‘le médecin s’est inscrit dans la tradition thérapeutique qui consiste à corriger la nature’ (44), that is for instance to secure women’s procreative abilities, to ‘abort genetically “deficient” fetuses’,³³³ to pathologise “different” children’s (like Elise’s) conditions. Indeed with a “natural” reproduction Jean does not underestimate the risk of passing on his own family genes (108). Consequently Jean decides to explore ‘les moyens que la science mettait aujourd’hui à notre disposition pour contrecarrer les erreurs eventuelles de la nature’ (106). For Jean, this will allow him to reach success and “perfection”, as a scientist and a husband. Françoise has just given birth and questions Jean about their daughter: ‘Comment est-elle? [...] Tout va bien?’ And Jean replies: ‘Elle est parfaite! [...] Exactement comme toi: parfaite!’ (193). If Françoise’s questions assuredly signify a mother anxious to be reassured on the health of her newborn baby, contrarily, Jean’s reply translates the satisfaction for the achieved control of reproduction. For Jean, France represents firstly his scientific success. Most importantly, France is ‘parfaite’ because she is Françoise’s child “for herself”, she is her ‘compagnon sûr’, which reinstates Françoise’s position as a mother and a wife to Jean, and which highlights Jean’s success as a scientist and as a husband.

The creation and control of a clone of his wife moreover allows Jean to envisage the possession of Françoise’s entire life. Françoise is described in the novel as obsessed with the age gap between Jean and herself, which the former does not consider as a barrier to their common lives to share. And he explains, ‘le caractère insensé des ces douze années d’état civil qui, selon elle, menaçaient de nous séparer. Est-ce son obsession qui, avec le temps, m’a contaminé à mon insu? A lire l’histoire à rebours, on pourrait le croire’ (89). Indeed Jean goes back in time and erases not only those awkward twelve years but also all those he did not live with Françoise, those before he met her. France allows him to prolong time (131), and to encapsulate the entirety of her mother’s life through the reflected existence of Françoise. His following confession reveals a profound (and worrying) confusion between France and Françoise, ‘J’allais connaître Françoise enfant, la voir grandir, faire partie de ses souvenirs depuis toujours. La vie recommencerait à zéro. Et je serais le seul homme de sa vie’ (163). Throughout the novel, Jean is often confounded by Françoise and France’s similarities. At the end of the story, he mixes them up one more time and ends up having sex with and killing

³³² Ettorre, p. 3.

³³³ Sawicki, ‘Disciplining mothers’, p. 194.

France, aged only twelve (389, 409). Jean has symbolically bridged the twelve year gap that separated him from his wife; it could be argued that this was France's role, that her lifespan was meant to reflect the age difference between her "parents". Indeed, Jean speaks of "resuscitating" his wife's youth, beauty and love for him (135). This creation, which Lambrichs calls '[un] pur objet de satisfaction narcissique', is for the author the absolute definition of monstrosity. 'Ce qui me paraît monstrueux', Lambrichs writes in the Preface, 'c'est de considérer un être humain non pas comme un sujet à part entière auquel on ouvrirait l'avenir [...], mais comme un objet ou comme un autre, préexistant.' (38-9). Lambrichs identifies the origin of monstrosity in the limitation of a human subject's possibilities, and in the desire to replicate what already exists (either via the use of cloning, or in the repetition of the parents' own desires). In accordance with Lambrichs's words, and following my exploration of Elise and France, I will argue in the final parts of this chapter that the monstrous subject is born of the constrictions of reproduction. Moreover, as these expectations arise from parental desires, I will explore Jean's own difficulty to position himself in relation to the two female characters (which makes France abject for Jean), and his failure to allow France the straightforward role of daughter and the place of a human subject (resulting in the creation and destruction of the monstrous character).

4.3.4 France's impossible control, abjection and monstrosity

A ton image portrays the contemporary fears and the potential misdemeanour of unchartered scientific advances. In the novel the reader is prone to considering France as a monstrous character simply because of her undefined identity as a clone, but as the story progresses, Jean's attitude towards France and Françoise enables a shift in the identification of monstrosity. The story also destabilises the reader because it highlights science's ultimate powerlessness, and the impossibility of fully controlling reproduction and its outcome. Cloning allows the scientist a certain level of (genetic) predictability, but does not guarantee the creation of an individual identical to the original. In this sense, the unpredictability of reproduction reappears, and with it, the possibility of failed control, of failed reproduction, and thus of monstrous subjects. I will demonstrate that monstrosity arises from failure and unpredictability in terms of reproduction. Despite being the product of a highly controlled reproduction, France will not exhibit the attributes (mostly in terms of behaviour) of her original (Françoise), which will

enhance Jean's own difficulty to position himself in relation to both female characters, and "experience" France as a confounding, abject and monstrous figure.

In a study entitled 'Cloning and Identity', Nicholas Agar reflects on the notion of identity in correlation with those of identical similarity and personal identity, and notes that it is a double-edged sword: it encapsulates the opposing notion of similarity and those of individuality and difference.³³⁴ The difficulty posed by cloning and represented by France lies in the indeterminacy of the place of the clone. In the Preface to *A ton image* Lambrichs affirms that the underlying question to the ethical and juridical debate surrounding human cloning basically concerns the status of the cloned individual. The attribution of a definite place in our contemporary society permits the determination of the individual's rights and duties, and the delimitation of their freedoms. She expands, 'Autrement dit, ce qui fait peur [...] c'est le fait qu'avec nos références conceptuelles actuelles, fondées sur le modèle biologique naturel, nous sommes incapables d'inscrire cet être dans l'humanité, de le nommer [...], autrement dit de *lui attribuer une identité*' (22). The clone borders humanity as an instance of monstrosity: it stands between humanity and "something else", and because of its humanity, it points to the unreliability and the fragility of the (definitions of the) human subject. In the novel, Jean hesitantly attempts to define the relation between France and 'sa mère', Françoise: 'Dois-je dire sa mère d'ailleurs? ou bien sa soeur jumelle? son double?' (209). The indeterminacy of France's role situates her in an in-between position, thus exhibiting the qualities of the abject as 'ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles'. For Jean who knows her identity (as a clone), she is seen as abject because she lacks a definite status in relation to Françoise (her mother, her double), her family and society at large. As Kristeva indicates, 'Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre'.³³⁵ For her "mother" and her "grandparents", France is simply Françoise's child and treated as a human being. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will unveil how the different assessments of France as a monstrous subject (she is monstrous in Jean's eyes but not considered as such by the rest of her family) highlight not only the inadequacy of the rules (which victimise individuals and make them monstrous) but also reveal that it is possible to see

³³⁴ Nicholas Agar, 'Cloning and Identity', *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 28 (2003), 9-26 (p. 10).

³³⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 12.

this character as a human subject and as a victim, and ultimately to reassess her monstrosity.

France's difference, and ultimately her monstrosity, does not originate from a bodily impropriety. Contrary to Françoise for whom France is her daughter, for Jean, France's identity is unclear, and causes him to lose his ability to differentiate between the two characters, eventually destroying them both. Indeed Kristeva notes that the abject 'me tire vers là où le sens s'effondre'.³³⁶ To "make some sense", to affirm France's identity as his daughter, Jean displays the urgent need to officially announce her birth: 'Et juste après la naissance, la première idée qui m'était venue à l'esprit avait été de me rendre au service compétent pour accomplir les formalités de la déclaration'. And he continues, 'Comme si j'avais eu besoin, pour croire vraiment à l'existence de France et surtout pour en faire ma fille, de l'inscrire dans les registres et de lui donner mon nom' (197). In accordance with Lambrichs's remark in the Preface, Jean overcomes our incapacity 'd'inscrire cet être dans l'humanité, de [...] nommer [le clone] [...], autrement dit de *lui attribuer une identité*' (22), and establishes the link with France via the passing on, not of his own genes, but of his family name, paired with the feminine version of his first name: Jeanne (198). Prior to the birth of their child (and to the visible proof of its existence), Jean and Françoise do not discuss their choice of names (197), and it is Jean who officially registers the new-born as France Jeanne Marie Letertre. The mother is at first startled by the choice of the name: 'France ? [...] Quelle idée !' (197) Françoise concludes after her initial reluctance, 'Non, au fond, c'est une jolie idée. France, c'est une petite Françoise, une moitié de moi, en quelque sorte' (197).³³⁷ Indeed for Jean, knowing that the child is a clone of Françoise, and will consequently be female, Jean deduces, 'Ce serait donc une fille. France. Immédiatement son nom s'est imposé' (163). And as Françoise learns Jean's decision after the birth, the latter underlines his 'goût pour ce prénom légèrement désuet, qui entraine subtilement en résonance avec celui de Françoise' (195). France only represents one half of Françoise (Franç/ France) and indeed half of an individual and symbolically, as she is experienced by Jean, only a part of Françoise's life and not a full human being.

³³⁶ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 9.

³³⁷ The choice of the name France for a clone could also be a reference to the country's gradual (fear) of depopulation which cloning could prevent by the endless reproduction of ethnic Frenchmen. As I show later in my analysis, Françoise's father interprets the choice of the name France as a sign of Jean's nationalistic (political) views, of which he approves greatly.

The confounding physical resemblances between Françoise and France cause Jean indecision regarding France's position : this leads him to qualify both female characters as 'un seul être dédoublé' (265). Similarly the confounding physical similarities lead him to fuse his feelings of love for the two female characters, and to admit: 'c'est à la réplique de Françoise qu'en elle je me suis attaché' (384). Moreover, Mr Germont's (Françoise's father's) double role denotes of a further link between France and Françoise (they share the same father), and of the cross-generational link between women, mothers and daughters, which only Jean witnesses. France's name indeniably resonates with her mother's. What is more, she bears as a second name Marie, which is also Françoise's second name, 'Et aussi celui de ma grand-mère!' Françoise exclaims, 'Tu ne le savais pas ? Ça ne fait rien, c'est très bien, maman sera ravie. Elle s'imaginera que tu as pensé à elle... enfin à sa mère, c'est parfait' (198). Their common female relative is called Marie; this recalls the Virgin Mary and Immaculate Conception who gives birth without the necessary sexual act, excludes the need for a male partner/gamete, and strengthens the family's female bond. Françoise in her voiced confusion between her mother and her grand-mother reinstates the above deduction. In Jean's eyes, this posits France as linked firstly to Françoise in her capacity as a clone, and also to her mother in her role of daughter and the perpetuated family female lineage through her second name.³³⁸ The mother-daughter connection between France and Françoise is therefore connected to the prior generation, and would seem to embody Marianne Hirsch's 'continuous multiple being of monstrous proportions stretched across generations'³³⁹. However, none of the characters except for Jean are aware of France's indistinct link with Françoise; France in contrast is depicted as seeking independence and separation from her mother. In an episode, Jean recounts how the child is caught spitting on the mirror which projects both her and her mother's reflections (254-55). France illustrates the normal stage of abjection of the maternal. She does not accept her resemblance with Françoise, her lack of individuation, and she symbolically expresses her distaste, disgust – abjection³⁴⁰ – by spitting on their merged mirror images. For Jean however, France does not appear as a regular child, and he

³³⁸ Lambrichs focuses on the importance of family heritage in *Le Jeu du roman* and the transmission of madness through the maternal line in *Le Cercle des sorcières*.

³³⁹ Hirsch, 'A Mother's Discourse', p. 73.

³⁴⁰ France rejects the undelimited boundaries with her mother when she is pictured spitting on the mirror. Similarly Kristeva speaks of the rejection, *nausée*, of/for the skin on the milk given by the mother to the child, and writes, 'Mais puisque cette nourriture n'est pas un "autre" pour "moi" qui ne suis que dans leur désir, je m'expulse, je me crache, je m'abjecte dans le même mouvement par lequel "je" prétends me poser.' (Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 10-11).

remains profoundly disturbed by this subject whom he sees as abject and monstrous. In the conclusion to this chapter, I will reveal how the assessment of this character's monstrosity varies (between Jean and Françoise) and indeed how it may be questioned.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored another stage in the human lifespan – reproduction – where the emergence of monstrosity speaks of the subject's inability to match definite sets of corporeal and behavioural criteria. I will return to the case of France to explore her transformation into a monstrous subject in the eyes of her “mother”. Furthermore, I will show how, despite her normal relationship with Françoise, the judgement on France as a reproduction changes (from successful to unsuccessful) when she learns about the identity of France. However, it is not strictly speaking because France is a clone that she becomes a failed reproduction; returning to Kristeva's notion of the child-cure, I demonstrate that it is the collapse of this principle that shatters Françoise.

I showed that Françoise dismisses the various fertility techniques she is suggested by her husband and doctor; she wants a child ‘pour elle-même’³⁴¹ and by elle-même and what Curti describes as a ‘product of artificial grafting and mechanistic (de)constructions, sometimes even of clumsy, old-fashioned surgery’.³⁴² Kristeva writes ‘L’angoisse de malformation du fœtus, courante chez la plupart des femmes enceintes, devint chez Isabelle d’un paroxysme suicidaire. Elle imaginait que son bébé mourrait au cours de l’accouchement ou bien naissait avec un grave défaut congénital’.³⁴³ I have argued above that Kristeva's patient Isabelle and Lambrichs's character Françoise both envisage pregnancy as a solution to their depression, and the child “for themselves” as a cure. However, the impossibility to have *this* child, either because of sterility, or because it does not live up to their expectations (‘un grave défaut congénital’; similarities with Elise; and ultimately differences with the mother) demolishes the prospect of obtaining ‘un compagnon sûr’³⁴⁴ and renders the procreation enterprise (and simultaneously the success of the cure) null. Kristeva argues that in the eventuality of ‘grave défaut congénital’,

³⁴¹ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 100.

³⁴² Curti, p. 120.

³⁴³ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 101.

³⁴⁴ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 100.

Elle le tuait alors, avant de se donner la mort, mère et enfant se retrouvant de nouveau réunis, inséparables dans la mort comme dans la grossesse. La naissance tant souhaitée se transformait en enterrement, et l'image de ses funérailles exaltait la patiente, comme si elle n'avait désiré son enfant que pour la mort. Elle accouchait pour la mort.³⁴⁵

The child who does not observe the initial scope statement is a product of a failed reproduction. It does not serve its healing purpose for the mother. Imperfection is unacceptable; as Kristeva explains, the mother is compelled to kill the newborn and join it in death as an alternative to the living unbreakable bond of their relationship (the dead version of the mother-child relationship with its 'compagnon sûr'). Death provides the ultimate reunion between the mother and the child; it defies the physical and forthcoming separations that are imposed and announced by birth, and also prevents alienation with the child, its categorisation as "not normal", and its final rejection.

The initial unmet expectations of the child will cause its immediate death or its future rejection. France is eventually rejected and killed by Jean. Similarly the mother rejects the bond with her "daughter" when she learns that France is not her 'compagnon sûr' nor her own child, but a monstrous extension of herself. France is the product of a failed reproduction as she fails to fulfil her primary function of 'enfant antidote' because she is a clone and not a child of Françoise. The impostor newborn was not identified and France is too old to be destroyed (by her mother). The Kristevan death of the mother and the imperfect child will not resolve the (corporeal) failings of the offspring as France is not her daughter at all; this demolishes the very concept of the child-cure. Françoise thus commits suicide and metaphorically escapes this monstrous bond of abject un-differentiation by throwing herself out of the window of her psychiatric institution (387). In a nutshell, France is for Françoise an unsuccessful reproduction; furthermore, the revelation of her identity as a clone, which also fragilises Françoise's own notion of self, eventually results in France becoming monstrous for Françoise.

In this chapter, I have shown that for Jean, the assessment of France's monstrosity, and whether she constitutes a successful reproduction, differs from Françoise's rationale which I have just explained in this conclusion. For Jean, France oscillates between life and death, and between roles and places; he confesses committing with France the same parenting failures that he despised as a child: 'De même que mes parents ne m'avaient pas vu, j'ai été incapable de voir France – je veux dire, de voir ce qu'elle était, ce

³⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Soleil noir*, p. 101.

qu'elle aurait pu être. [...] J'ai vu France comme une répétition de Françoise et l'ai enfermée dans ce rôle' (400). France is locked in an unattainable role which subsequently entails her final suppression as an impostor. At the end of the novel Jean is led to strangle France whom he has mistakenly taken for Françoise in a dream (409). Shildrick explains that 'Human monsters [...] both fulfil the necessary function of the binary opposite that confirms the normality and centrality of the accultured self, and at the same time threaten to disrupt that binary by being all too human'.³⁴⁶ Jean acknowledges the (physical) separation between the two female characters; however France's "all too human" monstrosity, that is her staggering similarity with Françoise, perturbs boundaries. Shildrick continues, 'It is, then, in their failure to wholly and only occupy the place of the other that such monsters betray the fragility of the distinctions by which the human subject is fixed and maintained as fully present to itself and autonomous'.³⁴⁷ In a nutshell, France is a failed reproduction for Jean because she does not fulfil the primary aim for which she was created: the clone does not save Jean's marriage with Françoise; she destroys the lives of her "parents" and she does not allow Jean to create the happy family of his dreams. Jean's assessment of France's monstrosity is linked with his own inability to position himself in relation to the child, to situate her in relation to Françoise, and ultimately to grant France a full place as a human being. However, as I show next, Lambrichs's text makes it possible (for the reader) to question Jean's assessment of France's monstrosity.

The final incestuous act with France pushes Jean beside himself: 'j'étais débordé maintenant par une fureur invincible qui me poussait, serrant de mes forces déchaînées mes doigts sur sa gorge blanche, à étrangler notre crime' (409). While in his narrative he confesses confusing France for Françoise (thus mistaking a twelve year-old for a grown woman), Jean (and indeed the reader) is confronted with the vision of a dead child: 'la dépouille qu'elle laissait, dotée de petits seins à peine éclos, était bien celle d'une enfant à peine pubère' (411). At the end of *A ton image*, another monster is revealed: Jean. He is a different type of monster (in comparison with the monstrous characters analysed so far in the thesis) because he is a monstrous murderer. In Lambrichs's story, all characters die before Jean, who asks, 'quel monstre étais-je donc pour survivre à tout ce que j'aimais? à tout ce qui m'avait fait?' (410) Arguably, Jean is the ultimate monster in the story as he survives (read, destroys) everything and everyone that he loves and that have made him into who he is (a monster). The

³⁴⁶ Shildrick, p. 55.

³⁴⁷ Shildrick, pp. 55-56.

revelation of Jean's monstrosity shows that he is unreliable, untrustworthy, that his assessment of others' monstrosity may be flawed and by extension his narration of the story strongly biased. The reader is left to emit a judgement on this character and this narrator; as Best writes, 'le jugement éthique que nous portons sur Jean [...] s'avère être la force motrice cachée du récit'.³⁴⁸ Indeed, the reader may decide to reread the story. For Jean, 'Pourtant, tout le problème est là'; he expresses his reservation, 'lire l'histoire à rebours, l'interpréter à la lumière de la fin, désormais connue, est-il légitime?' (89). Readers may see Jean as a victim and share his opinion that 'ces relectures de l'histoire ne sont [...] qu'un appauvrissement défensif' (90). On the other hand, Lambrichs's story also makes it possible for the reader to condemn Jean, to oppose his stated opinion and to reread the story in which France's monstrosity may thus appear under a different light. As Jean is the narrator there is no direct access to the character of France; however her position as a monstrous subject in Jean's (now questioned) story/perspective still makes it possible to envisage France as a victim and not as a monster.

It must be noted that in *A ton image*, the reassessment of monstrosity is limited to the character of France: Elise remains a monster in her parents' household because of their (not Jean's) expectations and treatment of this individual. Elise, like Plectrude and Irène, is made monstrous by social restriction and indeed monstrous "for all". Elise and France have provided two different cases of monstrosity within this chapter, and allowed a progression in my overall exploration of monstrous subjects in this thesis. In my next chapter, I will demonstrate that the reassessment of monstrosity, that began here through the character of France, is developed in Detambel's writing thanks to the questioning of the disciplining structures which create monstrous subjects. If the reassessment of monstrosity depends on the reader's moral judgement of the narrator in *A ton image*, I will explore how in Detambel's writing this reassessment of bodily difference and self-other relations is contained within her stories of old age, and how her texts offer creative spaces to explore other ways of being in the body.

³⁴⁸ Best, 'Le fantôme à venir', p. 193.

Chapter 5. Monstrosity and old age in Régine Detambel's

Le Long Séjour, Mésanges and Noces de chêne

5.1 Introduction

My exploration of the emergence of monstrosity during diverse episodes of the human lifespan finds its last component in this chapter, where I read Régine Detambel's portrayal of monstrous old age. I will show that in her oeuvre, this author takes the aged character on a journey where the perception of old age evolves thanks to a reassessment of (the place that is attributed to) the monstrous subject. Her texts on the treatment of old age in our contemporary society that I will analyse – *Le Long Séjour* (1991), *Mésanges* (2003) and *Noces de chêne* (2008) – offer a creative and complex re-imagining of her own social commentary on the topic, also expressed in her essay *Le Syndrome de Diogène* (2007).³⁴⁹ In her novels, the authorial voice clearly criticises social attitudes with regards to old age (and I will analyse how these texts articulate alternative (non-disciplinary) modes of treatment of aged subjects); moreover, I will also demonstrate that these novels point beyond alternative images of old age. Indeed, I will show how they extend towards new attitudes regarding corporeal difference for human subjects in all stages of the lifecycle. My analysis of monstrous old age in her novels will allow me to unveil how in Detambel's writing monstrosity is envisaged as a way of interrogating changing models of corporeal identity, via a focus here on aged subjects whose bodily and psychological changes are often regarded as degradations within our contemporary society. Ultimately, I will unveil that Detambel's fiction creates space from which to explore other ways of being in the body, and alternative modes of becoming.

The study of the monstrosity that can erupt during old age is best understood as a final chapter in my thesis for several reasons. This is not solely because old age is the latter stage in the human lifecycle (after all, it could be argued that the exploration of the monstrous sick subject could have come after rather than before the study of old age).

³⁴⁹ Régine Detambel, *Le Long Séjour* (Paris: Julliard, 1991); *Mésanges* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); *Noces de chêne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008); *Le Syndrome de Diogène: Eloge des vieilleses* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2007). Subsequent references to the first three texts (Detambel's novels) will be from the same edition and page numbers will be provided in brackets in the text.

Indeed, to evaluate how monstrosity informs the rejection of the aged unfit individual, it was firstly necessary to explore in the first three chapters (in order to criticise them here) the processes by which subjects are controlled, made monstrous and rejected – either in fully-fledged disciplinary institutions or within familiar environments – and how this rejection in turn induces forms of self-rejection. Moreover, the possibility to re-evaluate the monstrosity of one character (France within Lambrichs’s *A ton image*) is extended and developed differently by Detambel in her texts. I will critically follow the author’s progressive re-incarnation of subjectivity and agentivity in her aged characters, and argue that their portrayal productively explore avenues for a wider (social) reconsideration of the aged, and indeed of notions of bodily difference and (corporeal) identity. Furthermore, in my previous chapter I argued that the reassessment of monstrosity is enabled by the possibility of rereading the story; I will show that Detambel’s writing provides a creative space to rethink (reread and rewrite) alternatives modes of being in the body.

5.1.1 Régine Detambel: bio-bibliography and literary recognition

Born in 1963, Régine Detambel initially trained and worked as a professional physiotherapist, before becoming a published author at the age of 27. Since *L’Amputation*³⁵⁰ which came out in 1990, she has written numerous books for adults and also for children. With twenty-three novels to date, over twenty-five works aimed at children/young adults, multiple essays, poetry and short texts, she is indeed the most prolific author whose work I analyse in this thesis. In Chapter 2, I unveiled how critics have deciphered expressions of monstrosity in Nothomb’s prolificacy and her relationship with writing. Similarly, Detambel’s productivity may have impressed – and also invited comparisons with a monster – but the critical attention she has attracted has not matched the wealth of articles published on Nothomb’s writing.³⁵¹ Moreover, as I show in my next section, if critics have investigated Detambel’s literary exploration of (the intersections between) the body, self-other relations and forms of constriction for instance, these critics have not explored Detambel’s characters via the lens of the

³⁵⁰ Régine Detambel, *L’Amputation* (Paris: Julliard, 1990).

³⁵¹ Marie-Claire Barnet discusses Detambel’s “monstrosity” in the opening section of her article; indeed one of the few studies published on Detambel’s *oeuvre*. See: Marie-Claire Barnet, ‘Anatomical writing: *Blasons d’un corps masculin*, *L’Ecrivain* and *La Ligne âpre* by Régine Detambel’, in *Women’s Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 93-105 (p. 93).

monstrous. Finally, Detambel's work has been recognised for its literary merit. Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, she was awarded Le Grand Prix de la Société des Gens de Lettres 2011 Magdeleine Cluzel for her lifelong literary contribution, as well as the prize Anna de Noailles of the Académie française.

5.1.2 *Critical readings of Detambel's novels, and plan of the chapter*

Firmly installed since 1990 in the "new generation" of women writers in France, Detambel is presented in Rye and Worton's volume as an 'important nam[e]' alongside Christine Angot, Marie Darrieussecq and Agnès Desarthe.³⁵² Detambel's work testifies to a profound interest for images of the body and its articulations in writing. Some of her texts like *Blasons d'un corps masculin* or *La Ligne âpre*³⁵³ demonstrate Detambel's connection with the Oulipo group, authors whose works are often produced under defined restrictions of form or language. In her article entitled 'Anatomical writing', Marie-Claire Barnet explores how the author seeks to redefine the relationship between language and the body via the form of the 'blason poétique'. Barnet enquires whether Detambel's writing of the body may be termed "new" since she uses a literary form usually found in male writers, and also as Detambel distorts (rethinks) it by playing with opposite forms ('contre-blason').³⁵⁴

Detambel's exploration of the body in writing also intersects with her profession as a physiotherapist. In his article entitled 'Régine Detambel: 'Au commencement était la mécanique'', Bruno Blanckeman offers a reading of *La Ligne âpre* in which Detambel reviews (and rewrites) the human body via its bone structure.³⁵⁵ Blanckeman analyses Detambel's inquiry of the body from within, in conjunction with strict literary rules (Oulipo). In this same article, the author proposes a parallel with another novel by Detambel, *La Verrière*,³⁵⁶ which depicts the conflicts between a mother and her teenage

³⁵² Rye and Worton, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, p. 1.

³⁵³ Régine Detambel, *Blasons d'un corps masculin* (Montpellier: Via Voltaire, 1996); *La Ligne âpre* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1998).

³⁵⁴ See: Marie-Claire Barnet, 'Anatomical writing: *Blasons d'un corps masculin*, *L'Ecrivain* and *La Ligne âpre* by Régine Detambel', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 93-105

³⁵⁵ Bruno Blanckeman, 'Régine Detambel: "Au commencement était la mécanique"' in *Nouvelles écrivaines, nouvelles voix?*, ed. by Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 141-57.

³⁵⁶ Régine Detambel, *La Verrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

daughter. Blanckeman's devised corpus allows him to explore the creation of a text and a human subject through the imposition and resistance to fixed sets of rules.

Finally, Kathryn Robson's article entitled 'Virtual reality' offers a reading of Detambel's *La Chambre d'écho*³⁵⁷ in parallel with Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes*.³⁵⁸ In her study, Robson undertakes an investigation of different types of loss and of the limits of psychoanalytical (Freudian) distinctions. She investigates in the novels by Detambel and Darrieussecq alternative models of loss of a human being, mediated via the disappearance (rather than the death) of an individual. In my exploration of *Noces de chêne* in the third part of this chapter, the main character of the story experiences a form of loss that is comparable to the one determined by Robson in her article, and which also impacts on the relationship between the subject and his/her body. Whilst the reader is aware of the death of the aged character Maria, I will show that her lover Taine, oblivious to her death, is pushed by her disappearance to explore beyond the limits of the institution (and symbolically beyond those of his body) so as to search for Maria, a search which transforms into a renewed identity quest and a re-evaluation of former feelings of rejection.

The question of the rejection of old age addressed in Detambel's texts relates to the 'dominant gerontophobia' that critics like Kathleen Woodward have uncovered in our contemporary society.³⁵⁹ Indeed, common perceptions of old age are often reduced to (abject) visions of bodily deteriorations, a diminishing of the mind and ultimately a disappearance of the known self (which coincides with the eruption of the monstrous). In the second part of this chapter, I analyse in *Le Long Séjour* Detambel's poignant portrayal of the alienating experiences of old age; the aged characters depicted in the retirement home are subjected to disciplinary rules which reflect society's rejection (and attempt to control) the "disgusting" bodily transformations that occur with ageing. The feelings of abjection and self-rejection, caused to subjects within the disciplinary institution, are explored by Detambel via the portrayal of monstrous characters, whose monstrosity aligns with the subject in Nobécourt's writing. In my third part, I explore in *Mésanges* Detambel's portrayal of positive models for the care of the aged; I will

³⁵⁷ Régine Detambel, *La Chambre d'écho* (Paris: Seuil, 2001).

³⁵⁸ Kathryn Robson, 'Virtual reality: The subject of loss in Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* and Régine Detambel's *La Chambre d'écho*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41(2004), 3-15.

³⁵⁹ Kathleen Woodward, *Ageing and its Discontents. Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 7-8.

uncover how it constitutes a move towards the (self-)acceptance of bodily changes, in a structure whose system is reassessed (not disciplinary) and which evokes in turn a reassessment of the disciplinary system. The interrogation of notions of bodily difference and self-other relations is further developed in *Noces de chêne*. In my fourth part, I will read Detambel's imagined ways to liberate the aged subject of the multiple constrictions set by society and within the disciplinary institution. I will explore how the aged character who has fled the retirement home is in fact on a quest for identity, showing how bodily limits and notions of (self-)rejection may be rethought. This aged subject, comparable to Jordan's 'polysemic body',³⁶⁰ will indeed encompass all the forms of (self-)rejection that I have explored in this thesis, and embody new models of subjectivity, more fluid understandings of bodily identity, and revisited attitudes towards others' difference. Furthermore, I will unveil how the multiple images of opening present in the text suggest a character "under construction", in the process of becoming; and how Detambel's writing provides a creative space for (these subjects to experiment with) new ways of being in the body.

5.2 *Le Long Séjour*: making monsters in the retirement home

5.2.1 *Monstrous old age: between 'surveiller' and 'punir' in the retirement home*

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I have explored the emergence of the monstrous as a consequence of society's imposition of control over individuals, via the delimitation of what is considered as acceptable and normal for the subject's body and his/her behaviour. The monitoring of these norms is ensured via multiple disciplinary institutions across all areas of society, where strict rules dictate the place and role of the subject, and influence how people see themselves and each other. I have explored different models of Foucauldian disciplinary institutions, fully-fledged institutions (like the dance school in Chapter 2), and I have shown that their principles also permeate the intimate space of the family as well as stages in the human life cycle (in Chapter 3 and 4). I would argue that the role of the disciplinary institution is mainly twofold, as expressed in the title (and the English translation) of Foucault's essay. Firstly, it aims to 'surveiller' and 'discipliner' subjects, that is to tame and shape their bodies and minds (this is best exemplified in schools or in the army). Secondly, it seeks to 'punir' and to

³⁶⁰ Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 80.

contain (in order to correct) those deemed as different and unacceptable members of society (as in prisons). All types of disciplinary institutions contain to an extent a measure of disciplining and punishment, and due to their nature (educational vs. punitive, for instance), some establishments obviously put more emphasis on one of these features. Other disciplinary establishments however, like psychiatric hospitals and retirement homes, are less easily categorised; indeed, they seem to signal multiple limits – of society, of mental normality and of human life. In *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*³⁶¹ Foucault explains how the development of medicine affects the treatment of different members of society, and how it operates a shift in the place for mentally-impaired individuals, from family/home containment to their separation from society in dedicated institutions. In Chapter 4, the character of Elise illustrates the pre-medicalised stage in the treatment of abnormality, and she represents the monstrous sibling who is not rejected (not institutionalised) outside the family, but experiences different forms of alienation within the family unit. In her texts, especially as I will show in *Le Long Séjour* and *Noces de chêne*, Detambel criticises the victimising effects of the over-medicalisation of old age and portrays subjects who, unlike Elise, do not escape the institutionalisation of their medicalised “condition”. I would argue that the retirement home in Detambel’s novels could be read as a “hybrid” disciplinary institution in which the disciplining and punishment of aged subjects appears unregulated, subject to the individual judgment of its rulers (its nursing personnel) and often downright unfair. In *Le Long Séjour* we see mainly the presence of disciplining methods, but in *Noces de chêne* Detambel tips the balance towards the punitive tendency and the retirement home almost becomes a prison. The escape of one of its residents will reinforce this inappropriate notion of imprisonment and allow Detambel to complete her dismantling of this institutional model of care.

My exploration of the treatment of old age in the retirement home as a disciplinary institution is based on my analysis of Foucauldian theory which I explained in detail in Chapter 2. In my reading of *Le Long Séjour*, I will underline the main occurrences of the founding principles of the Foucauldian theory that Detambel depicts in order to criticise them. The exposition of the inappropriateness of the Foucauldian model for the care of the aged represents the first step in her move beyond this structural model: in *Mésanges*, she will imagine other (non-disciplinary) ways for this structure to function,

³⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Folie et déraison (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

and finally in *Noces de chêne* she will overthrow the validity of the disciplinary principles. Here however, I will focus especially on what sets the retirement home apart as a disciplinary institution; before I explore its representation in *Le Long Séjour*, I will briefly compare it with Nothomb's dance school so as to show that these institutions are the birthplaces of different types of monstrosity. Framing the overall argument of the thesis, both Chapter 2 and 5 feature representations of fully-fledged disciplinary institutions, fit for different stages in life, and the first key difference is the authorial voice in their respective depictions. In *Robert des noms propres*, Nothomb simultaneously portrays the harshness of the rules in the dance school as well as Plectrude's deep passion for dance and her almost unconditional dedication to her art. It could be said that the author's blurry narrative voice conveys the workings of – but not an explicit opposition to – the disciplinary system in the school (indeed, several critics have focused in this novel on Nothomb's penchant for aesthetics). On the other hand, and especially in *Le Long Séjour*, Detambel opts for a more “confrontational” style – her literary take is situated between the medical precision of her physiotherapy training and her (personal) social involvement in the depiction of old age – which leaves little doubt about Detambel's position regarding the institutional system for the care of the aged. Moreover, what fundamentally separate the dance school and the retirement home are the types of subjects and bodies who join these institutions, and the part of personal choice in this decision. Indeed, Plectrude applies to study/train at the Opera school of dance, and she is selected on the basis of her ability as a dancer and because she matches the physical prerequisites set by her institution. In Detambel's texts, the author criticises the form of social exclusion which aged subjects have to undergo when they no longer match the corporeal and ability criteria of society; I will show that they are made to leave their homes and join the retirement home, a decision based on the grounds of physical incapacities and limitations brought about by old age. Whilst Plectrude voluntarily accepts her ‘incarcération’ (she can decide to leave the school), I explore the consequences of the forced displacement and confinement of the aged subject in the emergence of a monstrosity different from that of Plectrude. In Chapter 2, Plectrude's monstrosity develops out of the excessive rules in the school which no human body could endure; the metaphorical metamorphosis into a bird is an escape from (but always an unsustainable solution to) the unnatural impeachment of normal adolescent transformations. In Chapter 5, the uprooting of aged subjects and their ‘incarcération’ in retirement homes is a translation of society's desire to reject physical inappropriateness. The monstrosity that I will explore for these aged subjects is

reminiscent of Irène's: it rests on the visible signs of difference of subjects seen as diseased, other, even contagious. This rejection and displacement of the aged subject will thus make it more difficult for the aged person to accept the natural bodily transformations caused by old age, and to recognise him/herself in them, and induce feelings of self-alienation and abjection. Therefore, like Plectrude, Irène and Elise, I will show that the monstrous subject in the disciplinary institution of *Le Long Séjour* is presented as monstrous "for all".

5.2.2 Uprooting the aged subject for the institutional control of space and time

Le Long Séjour infiltrates the lives of three residents in the retirement home 'L'Age d'or', and captures scenes typical of the daily life of its pensioners and nursing personnel. Reminiscent of the documentary style, these individual snapshots are presented in three series of ten chapters, alternating the focus on an old man (referred to as 'vous'), an old woman ('Vous êtes une femme' (17)), and finally an old person whose sex is only betrayed by the grammar in the text, presented as 'Tu n'es ni un homme ni une femme' (19). The particular, initially distant, narrative voice of Detambel's text seems to report factual, daily information on a place of investigation and its people. Moreover, it conveys feelings and intimate confessions of its three residents characters, such as, 'Vous êtes perdu. Vraiment, vous n'avez plus de goût pour la nourriture' (32), and 'Vous êtes anxieuse. Votre estomac vous fait souffrir' (101) and finally, 'Tu te retournes dans ton lit. Tes jambes te font mal' (67). I argue that these represent elements of three distanced, disguised yet still individual narratives on the personal experience of old age. Detambel shows that in the institutional model in *Le Long Séjour*, aged individuals do not have a voice: symbolically, her characters are not allowed to say "I". In her next instalments on the depiction of aged people, the changes to the institutional system in the retirement home will go alongside a new perception of its residents, a new evaluation of their monstrosity, and together with Detambel's (re)insertion of these characters as subjects and agents in their stories. In *Le Long Séjour*, the clockwork rhythm produced by the cadence of the chapters seems to be reflected in the regulated movements of the cogs in the wheel (the residents, the nursing and management personnel), mechanically following an immutable pattern of tasks in a strictly divided space typical, as I show next, of a disciplinary institution.

The governing power system in ‘L’Age d’or’ relies on the creation of docile bodies. I explore next how the subject who joins the retirement home must initially undergo a process of uprooting – from their familiar environment, and also their sense of time – before the institution can posit the subject in a new space/time. In *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, Detambel proposes a definition of the retirement home where the uprooting of the aged subject is presented as necessary:

La maison de retraite est une institution conçue par la société pour offrir une place à des personnes que leur âge a rendues dépendantes, physiquement et/ou psychiquement. Ainsi, le placement du sujet âgé n’est pas le seul fait de la famille, mais une décision du corps social qui destitue la personne âgée de sa place à son domicile.³⁶²

Physical incapacity of the aged subject triggers his/her delocalisation and institutionalisation: it is a transition from known to unknown spaces, and a de-socialisation. Moreover, Detambel adds:

Il a quitté son chez-soi pour la chambre 31 d’une maison de retraite. Partition. Séparation. Oui, séparé d’une partie de lui-même qui est restée dans la vieille maison à l’escalier raide.³⁶³

The destitution of the old person’s place (in their home, within society) is presented by Detambel as a double partition of the subject’s place/space accompanied by a severe internal fracture of the subject (which I shall explore further later). However, the displacement and distribution of any potential blame or responsibility (between the family and society strata) work to visibly soften and standardise the process whereby the person is snatched from their home. In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir explained how the social isolation of aged people is to be associated with opposing attitudes of veneration or rejection by other younger members in society: in any case, the aged subject is placed outside the frontiers of humanity.³⁶⁴ According to Detambel, their separation can be justified as they are elevated to the status of sacred people:

il est nécessaire d’avoir des humains de référence, séparés des autres, des êtres sacrés. Le mot “sacré” veut dire “séparé”. Le *sacer* latin dit à la fois le vénérable et l’épouvantable. C’est pourquoi l’institution décide qu’ils seront conservés dans des lieux très différents des autres. Ce sont les maisons de retraite. Ces gens séparés du peuple, désormais immiscibles, on les appelle les résidents.³⁶⁵

³⁶² Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 233.

³⁶³ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 236.

³⁶⁴ Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 10.

³⁶⁵ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 12.

The retirement home presented by Detambel could be said to refer to a “hybrid” institutional model – which I have hypothesised above as a system undecided between surveillance and punishment – that welcomes people seen as both venerable and dreadful, already alluding to their forthcoming monstrosity.

Spatial destitution represents the first step in a series of separations which are typical of old age. This initial uprooting forms part of Foucault’s ‘L’art des répartitions’, and instantiates the first principle of ‘*clôture*’³⁶⁶; spatial confinement is operated between society and the retirement home (as two distinct non-linked spaces) and also within its walls. The isolation of the resident is further installed with the allocation of a delimited space in the home according to Foucault’s ‘principe de la localisation élémentaire ou du *quadrillage*’,³⁶⁷ which can be observed in ‘L’Age d’or’ where each resident is attributed ‘une chambre’ (71), which becomes their personal space. The appropriation of this delimited space can be read as a necessity to soothe the initial (internal/geographical) division, and it is exemplified by the old lady who refuses to call it a bedroom: ‘Vous avez pris possession de votre appartement comme si vous l’aviez vous-même choisi.’ (63) The illusion of ownership is reinforced by the character who receives a delivery of, and then arranges, her own furniture (61), mimicking the setting of her former existence.³⁶⁸ The control of space and its terminology³⁶⁹ is paired with a positing of subjects in space according to corporeal criteria. *Le Long Séjour* portrays the canteen of the establishment as an indicator of its residents’ physical abilities; the old lady is caught thinking: ‘Vous aimez cette pièce parce qu’elle rassemble, le temps d’un repas, tout ce qui est encore valide et peut porter la fourchette à sa bouche’ (91) while for the spoon-fed bed-ridden resident, we read: ‘Cela fait bien longtemps que tu ne vas plus à la cantine’ (95). The canteen follows ‘La règle des *emplacements fonctionnels*’ insofar as it grants the means of surveillance to a delimited space.³⁷⁰ The last step in the laying out of space is the addition of the ranking element:

³⁶⁶ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 166.

³⁶⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 168.

³⁶⁸ The old lady also recreates her former routine: ‘Votre fils, médecin boulevard Victor-Hugo, vient vous voir tous les jours. La femme de ménage de votre belle-fille s’occupe de votre linge. Vos petits-enfants se chargent régulièrement de garnir votre soliflore de cristal.’ (40)

³⁶⁹ Detambel notifies the reader in *Le Syndrome de Diogène* (p. 23) of the French government’s project in 1984 of a *Dictionnaire des personnes âgées, de la retraite et du vieillissement*. She comments: ‘Tout dictionnaire n’est qu’une illusion dès lors qu’il croit toucher à l’être. Celui-ci enchanta peut-être l’institution par la fascination de l’immobile. On y avait densifié la pensée. Papillons piqués sur le liège.’

³⁷⁰ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 168.

‘le rang’.³⁷¹ The old lady’s social status outside the home is perpetuated within its walls: ‘Vous faites partie des privilégiées’ (40). It allows her to remain different from other residents and to keep some caprices – her separate health personnel (77), hairdresser (41-2), personal assistant (80) and her somewhat whimsical dietary requirements (40; 93-94) – and also to be entitled to a better-located apartment at the expense of the health and safety of other (less well-off) residents (62). A pastiche of the separation between social groups is manifested by the division of the home’s canteen floor and subsequently enforces the ranking system inside the retirement home.³⁷²

Following the delocalisation of the aged subject and the control of his/her new space, Foucault’s theory similarly analyses the importance of controlling time within the disciplinary institution: it is necessary to symbolically extract subjects from their (sense of) time. The issue of dates and memory is tackled from the outset of *Le Long Séjour*:

Quel jour sommes-nous? Vous vous le demandez avec un peu d’inquiétude. Il vous semble que c’est mercredi, mais quelque chose vous souffle que vous vous trompez. (10)

The blurred sense of time engendered by the difficulty to remember days of the week is aggravated as the old person is made unable to know the time (precisely). The old man used to be able to control (his) time (and indirectly his body/agentivity through the planning of actions) as he possessed a watch, and he would check and rewind his alarm clock every day (9). Without a watch or a functioning clock, the resident is disconnected from time. ‘Vous demandez si votre réveil est à l’heure. Il l’est, à peu de chose près.’ We read the justification:

On estime que vous n’avez que faire des minutes. Vous n’avez pas de train à prendre, pas de rendez-vous. Il suffit de vous donner le nombre des heures. (21)

As they retire, the work force is transformed into redundant members of the society that eventually evicts them altogether.³⁷³ Their (professional, social, personal) lives end

³⁷¹ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 171.

³⁷² The old lady in *Le Long Séjour* speaks of the ‘restaurant (vous ne dites pas la cantine)’ (62). And we read again: ‘Vous occupez une table au fond de la pièce, une des dix tables réservées aux privilégiés. Elles sont séparées du reste de la pièce, que l’on pourrait nommer cantine, par une haie de fausses plantes, bien épaisse et filtrant remarquablement le brouhaha.’ (92).

³⁷³ Alison Martin comments on the exploitation of workers in capitalist countries. Actors of their lives and subjects while active members of society, their eviction into retirement at a pre-given time works as a process of objectification. See: Alison Martin, ‘Old Age and the Other-

when they become residents, and with the move, these individuals see the ending of their time (their days). My analysis of *Noces de chêne* will show how Detambel attempts to reverse this image and give the old person a new beginning, and how her text creates space for new futures/writings. For the old man cited above, the distance from the daily requirements of social/professional life diminishes his status as a human being (undeserving or needless of precise time) and he is left with an approximate, disorienting sense of time.

The subject who has been uprooted from time feels the vertigo of the timelessness of old age (an age unbounded in time).³⁷⁴ In the institution, it is compensated by the instauration of a new system – ‘Le contrôle de l’activité’ – which allows the institution to operate a temporal means of discipline. The first element is the instauration of an ‘*emploi du temps*’.³⁷⁵ In ‘L’Age d’or’, the timetable puts rhythm into the daily life of its residents who meet sanctions (verbal and corporeal) when it is not respected (89). *Le Long Séjour* portrays an institution where ‘*L’élaboration temporelle de l’acte*’³⁷⁶ circumscribes the extent and the duration of each timetabled activity, which subsequently victimises its residents. The limited resources of the home cause not only hurry and inattention from the part of the personnel (32-34) but also the disrespect and sacrifice of privacy of its residents; we read about the old man:

Au début, on vous laissait laver vous-même votre sexe. Même, la fille en bleu fermait la porte de la salle de bain [...] Et puis, par suite de compression de personnel, les filles n’ont plus eu assez de temps. Vous êtes extrêmement malheureux. (54)

Finally ‘*la mise en corrélation du corps et du geste*’ instigates ‘le bon emploi du corps, qui permet un bon emploi du temps’ where ‘rien ne doit rester oisif ou inutile.’³⁷⁷ The spoon- and straw-feeding of the aged bed-ridden resident exemplifies this principle: ‘Elle te fait boire avec une paille pour ne pas avoir à te soulever’ (95). The ‘fille en bleu’ works around the seeming handicap (later revealed as untrue (48)), and saves time by using a straw; but if the retirement home can appear as a place where time is seemingly endless (at least for residents), the nursing personnel is also part of the

Within: Beauvoir’s Representation of Ageing in *La Vieillesse*, *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 47 (2011), 126-37 (p. 129).

³⁷⁴ Detambel alludes to the vastness/expanse of old age and points to the difficulty/impossibility of finding an expression that would encompass old age (from the age of sixty): ‘un mot-ère [...] un mot jeté comme un viaduc par-dessus des êtres vivants et aimants’. Régine Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 20.

³⁷⁵ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 175.

³⁷⁶ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 177.

³⁷⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 178.

functioning of the institution and must therefore comply to time regulations. However, this mechanisation of time and personnel regularly leads to severe miscalculations,³⁷⁸ which highlight the inadequacy of this rigid system when working with individuals whose needs cannot be standardised. Detambel will propose in *Mésanges* another, more adapted vision for the care of old age, which prioritises an individualised approach to the subject, and rejects the victimisation that she demonstrates in *Le Long Séjour*.

My analysis of *Le Long Séjour* has so far laid out the fundamental elements of the disciplinary system in place in the retirement home (and began to highlight some of its limits) as the subject is snatched away from their space and time, and re-posed in an unknown environment. I will eventually show in this section how this spatio-temporal separation is followed by another type of separation, one between the subject and his/her body, a personal fracture that brings forth issues of abjection, and the emergence of the monstrous. However, before I can explore the subject's experience of self-alienation, it is first necessary to investigate what induces the aged subject to feel estrangement with his/her own ageing body.

5.2.3 Ensuring society's principle of visible corporeal propriety

I first explored in Chapter 3 the importance for all subjects in society to show visible propriety (for their body and behaviour), a principle which reappears in my exploration of old age. The aged individual, whose body and abilities no longer match the criteria to remain within society, is moved to a retirement home; I aim to show next that, once a part of this disciplinary system, the resident is subjected to (and as a docile body also willingly self-imposes) comparable corporeal standards and principles of visible propriety. In my analysis of institutional control of space and time in 'L'Age d'or' I have begun to underline in its rules the correlation between body appearance/ability, role and place in the institution. What I show next is first that they testify to society's discomfort with the question of old age; then, I will explore how the rejection of old age is in turn re-enacted by aged individuals themselves; finally I will demonstrate how the control of the aged (body), by society and residents, finds in the medical an apparatus of institutional power.

³⁷⁸ The inaccurate diagnosis of the old resident's inability to move or to feed himself leads to further mistreatments and corporeal abuse (48). The old man is left to rest – 'On vous a donné l'ordre d'attendre que vos vertiges s'estompent' – because the nurse, who under-estimates the resident's difficulties and who has more urgent matters to attend, has to consider issues of effectiveness and economy (21-22).

In her essay *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir provides a detailed anthropological and sociological account of the place of old age in history and various human civilisations, including our contemporary Western society (especially France). Before embarking the reader on her journey of old age, she proposes in the Foreword a fundamental interrogation:

qu'est-ce que vieillir? Cette idée est liée à celle de changement. [...] c'est l'inertie qui est synonyme de mort. La loi de la vie, c'est de changer.³⁷⁹

Despite the shared opposition of life and ageing against death, the initial positive connotations given to these changes are soon isolated and described as 'irréversible[s] et défavorable[s], un déclin.' And Beauvoir asks: 'que signifie le mot *défavorable*? Il implique un jugement de valeur. Il n'y a progrès ou régression que par rapport à un but visé.'³⁸⁰ Detambel's own essay on old age presents a reading and a reaction to *La Vieillesse*. She writes about the reliance on physical signs to categorise different members of society.

Chenu veut dire blanc, comme à la blancheur du visage on repérait le lépreux. Maintenant c'est à la blancheur des cheveux. On l'appelle la canitie.³⁸¹

The discolouration of hair stigmatises the subject as old simultaneously as connotations of disease are attributed to old age. Similarly for the narrator of Nobécourt's texts, it is not the actual state of health of the subject that society rejects, but rather the visual marks (the skin lesions) and the troubling gestures (scratching, and then murder) caused by her condition. Detambel adds,

Masque ou bandelettes, qu'importe, il faut cacher sa maladie. Les vieillards sont tous des lépreux. Les maisons de retraite, des lazarets.³⁸²

The bodily association between the corporeal stigma of lepers and aged people is completed by society's response and treatment of these subjects. Forever abandoned in delimited quarantine spaces (leprosariums, retirement homes), they follow Foucault's theorisation of the division between the lepers and healthy members of a community.³⁸³

³⁷⁹ Beauvoir, p. 17.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 12.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 231-33.

As I will show later in this first part, the issue of contagion frames people's response to old age, even when it is not regarded as a disease. Just as Beauvoir had remarked that '[la vieillesse] n'est pas seulement un fait biologique, mais un fait culturel',³⁸⁴ Detambel also highlights the role of the body – the ageing body, the body that becomes visibly distasteful – in the place and treatment of old age within society. She writes:

On n'aime pas que le temps soit visible. On n'aime pas ce cambriolage du corps, ce déguisement, cet horrible uniforme. On n'aime pas le désordre et l'altérité au sein de la belle ordonnance du fort. On n'aime pas le gris, le terne, le jauni, le ranci. Bref, on n'aime pas ces vieux qui passent leur temps à mourir par petits morceaux.³⁸⁵

As time is imprinted on the body and the aged subject stigmatised, the interrelation between place and body detaches the subject from the rest of the group, and as I will show, from him/herself. Moreover the discomfort, disgust and essentially the fear of the aged (body) are expressed in the rejection of its gradual bodily metamorphoses (the monstrous transformation) and also in the metaphorical breach and capture of the body, Detambel's 'fort'. Indeed I have noted that Detambel also compares the aged subject with the leper whose skin betrays the presence of the illness. The various steps in the degradation of the leprous skin are reminiscent of the breaching of the 'fort'/body and of 'ces vieux qui passent leur temps à mourir par petits morceaux.' The progressive weakening of the aged subject's boundaries will eventually allow the development of monstrosity – a transformation of the body and the self which, as I showed with Irène's skin deterioration, simultaneously comes from within and without the body, and cannot be controlled.

In *Le Long Séjour*, we find instances of residents who replicate society's refusal of visible ageing on the body. In the citation above from Detambel's essay, '[La] belle ordonnance du fort' represents the controlled and accepted body in society; constantly exercised and watched over, the disciplined body has to be checked regularly. We read in *Le Long Séjour*:

Ce matin, vous recevrez successivement votre kinésithérapeute, votre pédicure et votre infirmière. Il n'est pas question de laisser votre corps à l'abandon, aussi vous pliez-vous de bonne grâce à leurs traitements austères et souvent douloureux. (77)

See also other instances of the separation between aged people and adults with the aged person either treated as a "sacred" being or a child in Detambel's essay on old age (*Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 12; 53-54; 237) and in her novel *Le Long Séjour* (23; 61; 98).

³⁸⁴ Beauvoir, p. 18.

³⁸⁵ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 10.

On the one hand, it must be noted that the old lady is defying the expectations of the aged body – seen as useless, ugly or worthless – and goes against social convention when she decides to keep fit and healthy. However, we read later that her desire to maintain her body as fit (visibly proper) forms part of her ‘comba[t]’ against her ‘déchéance’ (121). She re-enacts society’s distaste for the aged body as well as the (institutional) controls which aim to hide/contain those improper changes. She subjects herself to daily gymnastic exercises (77-78) and regular painful bodily treatments to push back/erase the visible signs of time. The passing of time affects her bodily appearance; by controlling time she can maintain her place (in society, in the home) and her ability to remain visibly proper (read, not monstrous). ‘Qu’allez-vous faire ce matin? Vos pieds sont superbes et blancs, vos cheveux s’épaississent encore, vous brassez vos jours à pleines mains’ (80). If exercising must be recognised as a way for individuals of all ages to keep fit and stay alive, the open question that precedes the positive assessment of the resident’s physical signs of youthfulness creates an illusory relation between a control of her activity and that of her body and time, especially as the disciplinary institution restricts her terrain and scope of action.

Further than a personal wish for a younger appearance, the individual control of the body belongs to a general need to contain bodily excesses and improprieties, either by the subject, or by the institution. Detambel explains that,

Les odeurs, les cris, les impudeurs, tout le spectacle de la déchéance physique de la personne âgée, qui s’accompagne d’une dégradation irréversible de son image sociale, est, aujourd’hui encore, l’une des raisons pour lesquelles une famille envisage le placement en maison de retraite.³⁸⁶

In so much as the body and its image are factors to the admission of subjects in the retirement home, they can also contribute to the subject’s eviction. The residents in ‘L’Age d’or’ have to maintain themselves in a reasonable state of health: ‘Ici, on ne veut pas de malades’. We read:

Le soleil vous donne mal à la tête. Et il est très dangereux d’avoir mal à la tête. La dame qui habitait la chambre du fond a eu mal à la tête. Elle s’en est plainte longuement. Elle a décrit sa douleur par le menu. Elle n’aurait pas dû. L’ambulance l’a emportée.’ (23)

I propose a double analysis of the nature of the danger of headaches; on a first level of interpretation, they can be symptomatic of another more serious health condition, and as potential forewarnings, they should involve medical attention. But for the aged resident,

³⁸⁶ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 214.

the danger is displaced from health hazard to the threat of yet another displacement (this time from the retirement home to the hospital). Physical deviations, be they simply unsightly or medical, embodied or voiced, are not accepted in the retirement home:

Vous avez peur de retourner à l'hôpital et la prochaine fois que vous souffrirez, vous vous taisez le plus longtemps possible parce que vos veines ne supportent plus les cathéters, parce qu'on a dilaté vos narines avec des tuyaux, tourmenté votre sexe avec des canules. Vous vous êtes juré de ne plus jamais vous plaindre. C'est beaucoup trop dangereux. (13)

Residents are evicted and sent away to hospital, where they undergo bodily treatments described as corporeal punishments. In a way, it could be said that unconsciously residents “utilise” their fear of displacement and of medical treatment to “trick” themselves into maintaining a visually proper and healthy body (required by the institution). In the following extract however, the threat of spatial destitution (to the hospital, with potentially unpleasant treatments) is formulated by the nursing personnel. We read, ‘Tu ne bois qu’avec une paille. Tes draps sont souillés. On te menace sans cesse de l’hôpital parce que tu fais exprès d’avalier de travers.’ (47) Foucauldian echoes surface as the medical is presented as an apparatus for institutional power, and for the enforcement of its rules. Similarly, I explore in my next section another harmful derivative of the medicalisation of old age – the necessary hygiene in the retirement home – which causes multiple forms of separations between the subject and his/her body, and the environment.

5.2.4 Hygiene to avoid the threat of (abject) old age

The subject who re-enacts society’s rejection of old age and its disciplinary methods to ensure visible corporeal and behavioural propriety already shows signs of a subject at odds with his/her own ageing. The final element that inevitably leads the subject to self-alienation is hygiene. From the perspective of the resident, hygiene estranges the subject from his/her own body, and cuts communication with others; the view of society/the institution is that it ensures the necessary distance with subjects seen as unclean and diseased. The (refused) feelings of abjection born of the distaste of old age, though, seem to affect the nursing personnel before the aged individuals themselves.

The disciplinary institution operates on a strict timetable which regulates activities and disciplines bodies. In the retirement home, hygiene is the focal point;³⁸⁷ it serves as the instrument and the justification for routine actions as the hygiene and disinfection of premises and residents represent the main occupations in this establishment (54-55; 57-58; 62). However, the necessity to respect certain sanitary regulations leads to the excessive presence of nursing personnel in the residents' personal lives. Detambel explains that 'En veillant à l'hygiène parfaite de ses pensionnaires, l'institution va à l'encontre de l'intimité de la personne âgée.' Following the initial destitution of one's time and space, the resident's individuality is in turn "dissolved" by the institution: 'La vie en collectivité voudrait réduire l'odeur personnelle de chacun pour tout dissoudre dans une homogénéisation alcoolisée'.³⁸⁸ We witness in *Le Long Séjour* the irreversible consequences of the intrusion of the institution into the old man's relationship with his own body.

Vous ne pouvez plus rien faire vous-même. Vous vous laissez faire. [...] Vous êtes trop lent, voilà pourquoi elle ne vous laisse pas vous laver tout seul. Elle manque à tous ses devoirs. En vous aidant, elle vous perd. Vous ne saurez bientôt plus distinguer les différentes parties de votre corps, votre pied droit de votre pied gauche, votre dos de vos côtes. Bientôt, vous ne saurez plus reconstituer le puzzle à savonner. (52-53)

'Etre lavé par un tiers, c'est devoir se faire violence à soi-même', writes Detambel.³⁸⁹ The necessary help from the nursing personnel is transformed into a seizure of the resident's body. Moreover the gradual disempowerment of the natural right to wash oneself is presented in *Le Long Séjour* as an emasculation of the resident and a violation of his intimacy (54). The institution imposes sanitary rules that subject the resident to the daily intrusion of the nursing personnel into their intimate sphere; eventually, these will work to detach the aged person from their body, subsequently prompting feelings of self-alienation and abjection.

The widespread negative images of old age are inscribed in the retirement home's need to curb and contain its residents (to avoid the contamination), and clean the dirt/germs of old age. Rituals of daily hygiene (self-) imposed by/on residents work as exercises in deprecation and gradual detachment of the body from the self, and as I show next, of the aged subject from his/her environment. The nursing personnel (known as 'les filles en

³⁸⁷ It is interesting to note that according to Beauvoir, 'Jusqu'à la fin du XVe, les ouvrages sur la vieillesse sont tous des traités d'hygiène.' (Beauvoir, p. 25).

³⁸⁸ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 242.

³⁸⁹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 243.

bleu’) are rigorous with hygiene; as soon as a nurse makes contact with a resident, we read: ‘Elle ne vous touche qu’avec des gants qui plissent sur son poignet’ (14).

Detambel ironically stresses the gap between the theoretical teaching on aged people and the actual situation in a retirement home as a ‘fille en bleu’ wakes up a resident:

Elle vous serre la main. Il paraît que c’est important. On l’enseigne aux filles en bleu lorsqu’elles fréquentent encore l’école. Il faut serrer la main. N’oubliez jamais la poignée de main. Alors, docilement, vous recevez sa main, vous étreignez le gant de plastique qui écrase sur votre paume la transpiration de la nuit. (14)

This gap between theory (learned gesture) and practice (failed human contact) is comparable to the one between the nurse and the resident. The aged resident is resigned to the absence of communication with the nursing personnel³⁹⁰ while he is described a few moments before as being envious of agitated and unhealthy neighbours whose conditions grant them the care and attention of the night staff (11). The separation between the nursing personnel and the residents is first felt in the descriptive naming of ‘les filles en bleu’ and later in their association with their gloves. The old man cannot stand up on his own: ‘Vous attendez que les gants beiges vous prennent par les aisselles’ (21-22).³⁹¹ Indeed the reiteration of the metonymy of ‘les gants beiges’ in the stead of the human being who works as a nurse indicates the dehumanising consequence of the mechanical (and cold) omnipresence of the institution in daily routine activities.

The systematic utilisation of gloves prevents potential microbial contamination, and works as a symbolic manifestation of the layered interstices between residents and the personnel/other members of society. However, Detambel denotes yet another role of the gloves as she introduces their protective function for the institution and its personnel:

Les gants créent une fine paroi hermétique entre le corps du vieillard et le soignant, ainsi protégé du dégoût. L’hygiène est donc une nécessité, mais aussi un écran. Par l’usage des gants, le soignant se préserve symboliquement contre la dégradation de son propre corps.³⁹²

³⁹⁰ A disciplined member of the institution, the old man is also resigned to the immutable presence of the plastic frontier with the nursing staff, and he shows pride in his respect of the rule as he never seeks to challenge it. (*Le Long Séjour*, p. 14)

³⁹¹ Further references to the ‘fille en bleu’ are given according to the body part she uses for a given action: ‘Vous attendez [...] que les sabots de caoutchouc blanc viennent comme des buttoirs contre vos pantoufles, que la poitrine bleue s’arc-boute et fasse balancier pour que vous soyez là, les jambes écartées, le dos voûté, debout.’ (*Le Long Séjour*, pp. 21-22)

³⁹² Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 243. Beauvoir reports another instance of discomfort and contamination in *La Vieillesse* (pp. 42-43): ‘Un gérontologue américain affirmait que les études sur la sénescence risquaient de “provoquer un malaise” chez les chercheurs. Contagion, peur du mimétisme? d’une inoculation de la vieillesse par les poils, par les pores, par les cils?’

As noted before, hygiene allows the institution to perform and to justify regulated disciplinary actions in the home. Our contemporary society constricts aged people in delimited spaces and stigmatises their rejection via a widespread distaste for older bodies, and what could be put as the scheme against age.³⁹³ In the citation above, the gloves constitute the barrier against contagion, and function as symbols of the walls between the aged subject and the nursing personnel. However, beyond the risk of contagion, the gloves prevent the frightening association between “me” (“me” as the nursing personnel, as society) and old age. Essentially, the gloves provide a protection from the very fear of one’s future old age; they protect against the disgust of old age which itself announces that the gloved subject already partly projects him/herself in this alienating experience and physical degeneration. In *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, Kristeva writes about disgust: ‘Spasmes et vomissements qui me protègent. Répulsion, haut-le-cœur qui m’écarter et me détourne de la souillure, du cloaque, de l’immonde.’³⁹⁴ The subject who refuses all association (with old age, the motif of abjection), and ‘l’expulse’³⁹⁵ still conceives its presence as he/she anticipates it, as a form of abjection that is already felt. The gloves which protect the nurse from disgust therefore also protect her from a form of abjection, a form of (rejected) projection in the abject, and therefore here in old age.

5.2.5 *Body/self fractures: abjection and monstrosity of the aged subject*

The disconnections between the aged subject and his-her environment and time, between individual embodied experiences of age and their perceptions in society, and finally those between the nursing personnel and the residents, culminate in a final level of separation: the separation between the aged subject and his-her sense of self in old age. Body/self fractures are typical of old age, and Beauvoir analyses this process in *La Vieillesse*:

la complexe vérité de la vieillesse: elle est un rapport dialectique entre mon être pour autrui, tel qu’il se définit objectivement, et la conscience que je prends de moi-même à

³⁹³ Detambel cites the example of women’s magazines, ‘grands promoteurs de cosmétiques “anti-âge”’ in which only acceptable-looking aged actresses, singers or celebrities still figure, while Detambel stresses ‘le silence et l’invisibilité [...] presque absolus pour le quatrième âge, qu’on laisse croupir en son vivarium, en son insectarium.’ (*Le Syndrome de Diogène*, pp. 29-30).

³⁹⁴ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 10.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

travers lui. En moi, c'est l'autre qui est âgé, c'est-à-dire celui que je suis pour les autres: et cet autre, c'est moi.³⁹⁶

The “objective definition” of the self by others relies on various external factors (professional situation, chronological age, physical appearance). However, embodied subjectivity (the self in the body) only allows the subject to perceive progressive small-scale changes: ‘On ne se voit pas vieillir. Un jour, c'est un autre qui vous le dit. Le lendemain, mille autres.’³⁹⁷ It is the abrupt confrontation with the outside perception of the aged self that interrupts the natural progressive and personal ageing process to subsequently mark a cut-off point whereby the subject, now labelled as old, is presented/confronted with his/her “other” self. In her article ‘Becoming an Old Woman’, Valérie Cossy interrogates the place of differing views on feminism (those of Alice Rivaz and Simone de Beauvoir) on the representation of aged women. In a nutshell, the concept of the “other” introduced in *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) theorises the place of women as secondary, flawed replicas of men. In *La Vieillesse* (1970), Beauvoir similarly reads the place of the aged subject as diminished, unfit and redundant versions of the active member of society. Cossy reacts to Beauvoir’s parallels:

Old age is similar to the experience of womanhood in that one is made to internalize an external vision of oneself. If indeed the condition of the ‘second sex’ is characterized by women internalizing their status as ‘the other’, old age corresponds to a split of the self between the subjective and permanent self and the objectively old self as reflected in other people’s gaze.³⁹⁸

The ‘internaliz[ation] [of] an external vision of oneself’ is a double confrontation with the aged physique and with society’s rejection of it. It therefore entails the reconciliation with an unexpectedly changed physical self (fracturing identity as the subject cannot recognise his/herself) and the simultaneous integration of the outside rejection of the self as aged and different. I would argue that what is “reflected in other people’s gaze”, and subsequently the object of internalisation, is a learned representation of old age, a negative image alienating for the self.

³⁹⁶ Beauvoir, pp. 301-2. Beauvoir’s essay contains many anecdotes and testimonies of lived experiences of old age. She recounts in an episode the case of a group of aged women referred to as ‘mémé’ and the difficulty for one of them to associate with the term and her contemporaries. She speaks to herself ‘toi aussi, tu es une mémé’ and Beauvoir comments: ‘elle se tutoie: c’est à l’autre en elle qu’elle parle, à cette autre qu’elle est pour les autres mais dont elle n’a elle-même aucune connaissance immédiate.’ (Beauvoir, p. 312)

³⁹⁷ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 56.

³⁹⁸ Valérie Cossy, ‘Becoming an Old Woman: Feminism, Destiny and Freedom According to Alice Rivaz and Simone de Beauvoir’, *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 47 (2011), 222-33 (pp. 230-31).

The consequences of the realisation of the distance between the subjective self and one's exterior physique echo social eviction. On the one hand corporeal misfit causes social eviction, and on the other inculcated bodily standards cause the indoctrinated subject to be at odds with his/her changed aged body. Detambel concurs: 'nulle part ailleurs que dans la vieillesse je n'est un autre avec autant de violence'.³⁹⁹ Just as society rejects the unfit old body, the subject of the disciplinary society comes in turn to reject his/her own inappropriate physique, and then attempts desperate measures of rectification.

The adoption of corporeal rules creates a microcosmic representation of the disciplinary institution at the level of the individual. While the institution works to enforce disciplinary rules (on space, time, activity and body), the resident who seeks to control and correct his/her body must symbolically create additional (self-disciplinary) rules to go against (or beyond) the institution's indoctrination and "making" of docile old people. In *Le Long Séjour*, the old lady has resigned to abandon her life in society to live in 'L'Age d'or' (42). However, her reluctance to assimilate the place with a retirement home⁴⁰⁰ is paralleled with her refusal to envisage herself as an aged person: 'Il n'est pas question de laisser votre corps à l'abandon.' (77) Her fellow residents function as inverted role models. They embody the "other" part of her self that she constantly fights⁴⁰¹ to remain different: 'Tout ce qui est contenu ici, vous voudriez le fuir parce que vous êtes encore différente de ce qui vous effraie.' (78). In the first lines of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Kristeva evokes the difficulty to identify a clear source/location of what creates abjection: is it in me, outside me, or am I abject? She writes,

Il y a, dans l'abjection, une de ces violentes et obscures révoltes de l'être contre ce qui le menace et qui lui paraît venir d'un dehors ou d'un dedans exorbitant, jeté à côté du possible, du tolérable, du pensable.⁴⁰²

A symbolic expression of the old lady's 'fui[te]', physical difference provides the necessary (visual) distance to safeguard her against the assimilation with her

³⁹⁹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 15.

⁴⁰⁰ I have shown above how the old lady seeks to perpetuate her former existence with the replication of her personal space (apartment (*Le Long Séjour*, 61, 63)), former habits (41-2, 77) and her social/familial position (80, 40).

⁴⁰¹ The old lady's singularity manifests itself in her various privileges, her strict body discipline and hygiene (*Le Long Séjour*, p. 39, 40, 77-8) and her overall surveillance of her own body image (via language (39-40), activities (40-2) and dress (40, 65-6, 111)).

⁴⁰² Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 9.

surroundings, and simultaneously exteriorises (the object of) her fear. The character exemplifies Kristeva's subject faced with abjection – 'Apeuré, il se détourne. Ecoeuré, il rejette'⁴⁰³ – just like Irène who struggles to identify the source of her abjection and is similarly distraught, and ultimately fails to prevent her feeling abject. As I have evoked before, the monstrosity that affects the aged subject is born in a fully-fledged disciplinary institution but it differs from Plectrude's monstrosity. The aged individual who becomes monstrous undergoes processes of (self-)alienation and abjection comparable to those I analysed in the subject of Nobécourt's texts. For the aged lady in *Le Long Séjour*, the control of physical appearance symbolically protects the body against exterior aggressors/contamination and simultaneously works to prevent the natural process of physiological changes and their inscription on the visual self. Moreover, the term 'exorbitant' refers to what has gone beyond normal proportions, it points towards liminality, and, arguably, deforming, splitting the self. Temporarily kept at bay, the threat of physical degradation is however 'là, tout près mais inassimilable' not annihilated but solely 'jeté à côté du possible'⁴⁰⁴ for the subject cannot conceive its realisation.

Kristeva affirms that 'Le dégoût alimentaire est peut-être la forme la plus élémentaire et la plus archaïque de l'abjection'. It is manifested by 'le vertige qui brouille le regard, la *nausée*' that separates the subject from the motif of abjection.⁴⁰⁵ In *Le Long Séjour* the precursory signs are felt in 'nausées' – by the old lady just as it was the case for the gloved nurse – but they only temporarily guard the subject from the inevitable outcome. We read in the novel: 'Ce que vous saisissez parfois dans des nausées, vous le porterez aux chevilles, aux veines des bras, à la pliure des genoux, aux lèvres' (78-79). The concretisation of physical decay is imperceptible and uncontrollable: 'Et vous ne saurez pas que vous avez été envahie, malgré votre fureur' (78). Detambel's most poignant description of the subject's degeneration is conveyed via a spectrum of bodily transgressions. Manifestations of ageing are equated with loss⁴⁰⁶ and dehumanisation: 'un vieux, ça n'est plus humain', remarks Detambel in her essay.⁴⁰⁷ The aged resident is sexless and objectified, 'Tu n'es ni un homme ni une femme. Tu es une chemise blanche qui ne recouvre rien' (137). The retirement home is

⁴⁰³ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 9.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁰⁶ Ageing as often been approached in terms of mental and physical losses; see for instance: Joy Charnley, 'Introduction: Representations of Age in European Literatures', *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 47 (2011), 121-25 (p. 122); and Beauvoir, p. 511.

⁴⁰⁷ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 10.

a ‘vivarium’, an ‘insectarium’⁴⁰⁸ where the relationship between the nursing staff and residents is dependent on the level of physical degradation.⁴⁰⁹ The corporeal transformations caused by ageing are pictured as a process of hybridisation (‘Tu as tellement mûri que tu es mêlé à toute chose. Il y a un peu de toi dans tout ce qui rampe et qui va à la terre’ (68)) whereby the aged person is metamorphosed into a monstrous being. Margrit Shildrick explains that,

It is not that the monster represents the threat of difference, but that it threatens to interrupt difference – at least in its binary form – such that the comfortable otherness that secures the selfsame is lost.⁴¹⁰

Monstrosity arises from the impossibility for the aged female character in *Le Long Séjour* to remain different from other aged residents in ‘L’Age d’or’ (‘bientôt je serai cet autre’⁴¹¹), and from her powerlessness to prevent the abject invasion of her self. Symbolically ‘absorbée’ (79), invaded by the “other” part of her self, her internal boundaries collapse and her shape is lost: ‘Un jour, et vous savez presque la date de cette condamnation, vous n’aurez ni la volonté ni l’énergie de renoncer à l’informe’ (78, my emphasis). Indeed as Kristeva notes, ‘l’abject [...] me tire vers là où le sens s’effondre’.⁴¹² The shattering of the character’s integrity brings forth monstrosity since, as Shildrick notes, ‘[monsters] disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject’.⁴¹³ The old lady is a monster in the becoming – her physical transformation has begun and become unstoppable.

To conclude this part, I argue that Detambel’s *Le Long Séjour* portrays western society’s manifold expressions of the rejection of old age and its alarming consequences. Abject and (gradually becoming) monstrous, the old lady exemplifies the psychological split fundamental to old age, and also the desperate struggle to renegotiate a distorted subjectivity. Eventually unable to reconcile with her fractured

⁴⁰⁸ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 30.

⁴⁰⁹ See for instance in *Le Long Séjour* (95): ‘Quand tu t’es mis à ressembler à tes poissons, à devenir une miniature de toi-même, à chercher l’air comme ils cherchent l’eau, on a confisqué ton jouet.’

⁴¹⁰ Shildrick, p. 45.

⁴¹¹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 15.

⁴¹² Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 9.

⁴¹³ Shildrick, p. 4. Similarly Kristeva speaks of the abject as ‘Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles.’ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, p. 12.

identity, the subject gives in to her condition and metaphorically disappears.⁴¹⁴ We read in the novel the inevitable fall as a proleptic⁴¹⁵ descent into hell powerfully transcribed by the author with a mechanical succession of descriptions of lifeless and impotent daily routines (79-80). This character embodies what Joy Charnley notes as ‘Western societies’ ongoing obsession with youthfulness and desire to make old age invisible, either by making the ‘old’ appear ‘young’ or by simply refusing to see them at all’.⁴¹⁶

Detambel’s first take on old age in *Le Long Séjour* is a poignant portrayal of society’s rejection of old age and of these individuals, reflected within the retirement home that the author depicts, and in turn re-enacted by its aged docile bodies. The author establishes a correlation between social and personal rejection of the aged, and further rejecting notions of abjection and monstrosity. The aged subject who has been uprooted from his/her familiar space and time is re-posed in a foreign environment, where he/she learns to consider and treat the aged body as improper, a body that must be monitored, changed and hidden. The self-estrangement from the embodied experience of old age leads to subject to become abject. The self-rejection, paired with the entourage’s rejection of old age, victimises the subject further in his/her (forthcoming) monstrous transformation. This monstrous subject is therefore monstrous “for all” – like Plectude, Irène and Elise were in their respective contexts – but the monstrosity caused by old age resembles most that explored in Nobécourt’s texts. Further than a distaste for old age itself, what society expresses is a rejection of the widespread images of bodily deterioration, and any element that might signify or announce this degeneration of the subject.

This story of monstrous transformation of the aged subject by Detambel successfully presents the disciplinary model as unfit for the care of old members of society. Following the exposition of a dysfunctional system, her next step in the reassessment of aged people, and in the textual reassessment of physical/psychological difference, is situated in their portrayal in a different establishment. In *Mésanges*,

⁴¹⁴ Concerning the old lady: ‘Votre seule peur, c’est la cataracte. Si vous aviez, par malheur, la cataracte, alors ce ne serait plus comme aujourd’hui.’ (*Le Long Séjour*, p. 39) Progressive blindness could be read as a lost separation from/contact with the outside (and the visible body) and a slow, claustrophobic imprisonment inside the body.

⁴¹⁵ The metaphorical expression of the old lady’s power to control her physical degradation is rendered by situating the prolepsis in a distant future. The time is contained in between ‘Ce jour-là [...] Mais ce n’est pas demain’ (78) and the nightmarish prediction is abruptly interrupted by the sudden return to the present situation – ‘Qu’allez-vous faire ce matin?’ (80) – in a reassuringly younger body – ‘Vos pieds sont superbes et blancs, vos cheveux s’épaississent encore, vous brassez vos jours à pleines mains.’ (80).

⁴¹⁶ Charnley, ‘Introduction’, pp. 121-22.

Detambel imagines a structure of care where her aged character is given a voice and an identity and placed at the centre of her narration; not rejected and not abject, the aged individual will appear as not monstrous. This subject is no longer treated as a cog in the wheel of a disciplinary system which alienates the people – aged and younger – from the natural developments of another stage in the human lifecycle.

5.3 *Mésanges*: non-monstrous subjects in a new structure/textual space

5.3.1 *Detambel's transitions in the depiction of old age*

Detambel's depiction of abject and monstrous characters in *Le Long Séjour* reflects the attitudes of rejection in our contemporary society towards aged people. The disciplinary functioning of the retirement home replicates the separation of aged individuals from the rest of society, and the corporeal rules relate to the need for corporeal standardisation. The third part of this chapter reveals a transition in Detambel's portrayal of old age and in relation to the monstrous. I focus here on *Mésanges* and I show that (the depiction of) aged characters are (is) given a new space – the retirement home (and Detambel's novel) – where monstrosity and bodily difference may be perceived differently. It acts as a stepping-stone in the author's overall body of work on old age and monstrosity; contrary to the subjects in *Le Long Séjour*, Detambel focuses on one aged character who is given a voice and an identity whilst in the retirement home.

Published twelve years after *Le Long Séjour*, *Mésanges* (2003) is Detambel's next instalment in her depiction of the aged. It shows the evolving place of the (monstrous) aged individual in the author's oeuvre, where, as I will show, the retirement home is no longer portrayed as a disciplinary establishment dedicated to the constriction of its residents. As I will show in the last part of this chapter, *Noces de chêne* proposes yet again another vision on old age and monstrosity, one that could be envisaged outside the alienating corporeal norms of Western society. In Detambel's next novel dealing with old age, *Pandémonium* (2006), she once again puts aged characters at the forefront of her story, and portrays a family of aged managers of a retirement home who willingly confine themselves in the home. With *Sur l'aile* (2010) and *50 histoires fraîches*

(2010),⁴¹⁷ Detambel proposes instances of solitary experiences of old age, but stresses the harmony that can be found in later life. The literary depiction of old age is a trend in Detambel's oeuvre, and offers multiple visions of senescence; however, the author has not produced to date instances of aged individuals in our society.

5.3.2 *Opening institutional/textual spaces*

The story in *Mésanges* gathers several characters of various ages in the same textual and geographical space, and gravitates around the existence of an aged pensioner. Contrary to *Le Long Séjour*'s intermittent reports of its residents' lives, *Mésanges* renegotiates this former intrusion; this text opens up new creative avenues and paves the way for sharing (with the reader, and between the characters) a singular and personal experience of old age.

A brief diegetic overview of the time and space elements in these two novels will illustrate their diverging approaches to the subject matter. *Le Long Séjour* introduces old age via the disciplined routine in a retirement home; insomuch as the immutable pattern of chores restrains the residents, its repetitive nature delimits the necessary duration of the narrative to a single day. *Mésanges* however grants an indirect agency to the aged person: the length of the novel (and the stories of the characters) are connected to the life and death of a character named Mamie Jeanne, and all stories come to a close as we read allusions to her death. (123) Further to time monitoring and limitations, I showed that space is also highly controlled in *Le Long Séjour*. While both stories are situated in a retirement home, the institution in *Mésanges* is not a hermetic space but rather one for encounters and bodies in motion: indeed, the text offers (creative) openings for its subjects. This also represents a denunciation of the retirement home as 'vivarium' and 'insectarium'.⁴¹⁸ Detambel's text suggests in/via the retirement home the possibility for a site of exchange, acutely aware of the fine line between intimacy and intrusion, where corporeal senescence and difference are not the media for other social rejections.

A transitional step in Detambel's depiction of old age, *Mésanges* alludes to the necessary renegotiation of our relationship with the aged as embodiments of

⁴¹⁷ Régine Detambel, *Pandémonium* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); *Sur l'aile* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2010); *50 histoires fraîches* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

⁴¹⁸ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 30.

unacceptable physical difference. *Mésanges* shares with *Le Long Séjour* a common interrogation on the place allocated to aged people in contemporary Western society, but the insularity of the novel⁴¹⁹ – despite the multiple openings provided in the text – could symbolically manifest the need for a pause (for the author, for the reader) to re-think the issues at stake. Similarly, this section of my chapter reflects firstly the departure from previous condemnations of fixed attitudes (as depicted in *Le Long Séjour*) in order to point the way towards Detambel's latest examinations of the aged (*Noces de chêne*, in the fourth part of this chapter).

5.3.3 *Revising contacts with others and self-other relations*

Le Long Séjour exemplifies the aftermath of a social life regulated by corporeal factors and the subsequent isolation. As I have noted before, instructions and reprimands dictated by a strict timetable form the major part of the communication between the residents of 'L'Age d'or' and its nursing personnel. While written correspondence and visits from family and friends vary from pre-established relationships (71-76, 80-81, 97), the hope for a link with the outside world remains, for all, a tangible yearly event.⁴²⁰ However, if various impediments disconnect aged residents from society, death (see previous note) and religion represent the rare opportunities for moments of absence. Amongst its residents 'L'Age d'or' counts a priest: '[il] est pensionnaire, mais il sort, il se promène, il va jusqu'à la Maison de la Presse' (75). Interestingly, no other resident in the novel is pictured as allowed to come and go from the home. A messenger of God, he is moreover a bringer of news as he shares his newspaper with a fellow resident, therefore creating bridges with the world beyond the home. In *Mésanges* however the old protagonist is granted a similar gift as Mamie Jeanne talks of her lifelong protection by her guardian angel (81-82).

⁴¹⁹ Contrary to other novels by Detambel, *Mésanges* shows few instances of intertextuality and bridges with other texts. The only extra-textual references that I have noted are the reminiscence to an episode in *Le Long Séjour* (74) and the name place 'Ventoux' also used in *Noces de chêne* (73).

⁴²⁰ See *Le Long Séjour* (105-110) and the annual party of 'L'Age d'or' where the residents each write postcards attached to helium balloons released for 'la fête'. As one aged resident is later found under a bench, we read about allusions to death as the only possible escape from the home: 'Il aura trop rêvé au ballon échappé sans lui, qu'il n'a pas su entraver. Le ballon blanc ira plus loin, bien plus loin que tous les autres. Mais personne, jamais, ne saura.' (110)

Further to spiritual connections, Detambel demonstrates the possibility for intergenerational links with elder subjects initiating the relationships. The author makes the following observation in her essay on old age:

Franchir le seuil de l'institution est un événement. Désormais, la personne du parent est détrônée par l'enfant de sa position de sujet et découronnée de sa fonction d'autorité pour prendre la position de personne mineure, d'objet de placement. Le renversement générationnel est consommé.⁴²¹

Ageing of the subject ultimately entails deterioration and a reversal of roles and responsibilities between parent and child; however, if senescence brings about a certain weakening of the aged, it does not inevitably entail the objectification of lesser beings. *Mésanges* indicates via the relationship between Laurent and his aged mother the potential for a re-evaluation of widespread issue of the dependence and (financial) weight of the aged,⁴²² and alludes to the creation of a new rapport. As Mamie Jeanne is placed in the retirement home, we read:

[Laurent] est très fier de se sacrifier pour lui offrir cela. Il a, en somme, doté sa mère, il l'a fournie en trousseau et subvient sans compter aux besoins de son grand âge [...] Voilà ce que peuvent les fils, songe Laurent, marier leur mère à la vieillesse et tenir les cordons de la bourse de cet étrange ménage, inséparable et exigeant. (26)

Further to the reversal of roles between parent and child, Detambel introduces a complex restructuring of the relationship. Fluctuations between the place of the husband and father, and connections with the provider and benefactor, are simultaneously erased and endorsed by a loving son, whose moral obligation renders him proud to accompany his mother into the next chapter of her life.⁴²³ 'Les deux seules choses qui comptent à présent dans la vie de Laurent, [...] c'est le ciel, le ciel nocturne, [...] et c'est aussi que sa mère soit bien établie dans l'extrême vieillesse.' (26). With the maintained contact between generations we witness in *Mésanges* the creation of new enriching responsibilities and also the appearance of unexpected coalitions. Florence's daughter, Marine, a disturbed adolescent, finds refuge in the retirement home managed

⁴²¹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 237.

⁴²² On the disclaimer of the harmful increasing costs of a rapidly ageing population and its impacts on Western societies, see: Sarah Harper, *Ageing Societies: Myths, Challenges and Opportunities* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006) and Martin, 'Old Age and the Other-Within'.

⁴²³ Detambel insists on the necessity for the family and the retirement home to ensure the central place of the prospective resident so as to prevent their objectification. See: Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 237.

by her mother (62). The love relationship between Laurent and Florence is mirrored with the friendship and mutual care of Mamie Jeanne and Marine. We read:

Elle s’embrassent, elles se connaissent. Elles mangent ensemble au réfectoire de la maison de retraite. Florence les regarde s’apprivoiser avec une émotion de belle-fille. (63)

Not only is the communication with the aged proven possible, but old people also instigate dialogues between families (despite behaving as such, Mamie Jeanne and Marine are not grandmother and grand-daughter) and across generations (‘A la maison de retraite [...] Marine semble revivre’ (62)). Inasmuch as Mamie Jeanne indirectly instigates the encounter between Florence and her son, she embodies the link to their story (and the whole novel) and between their bodies: ‘[Florence] sait que la mère de Laurent est le seul être qui le rattache à la terre, c’est-à-dire à *son corps à elle*, Florence, et qu’il la quittera à la mort de la vieille femme’ (68, my emphasis). It is moreover interesting to note that the re-established connections with the aged are further explored through the mutual understanding of adolescent and senescent corporeal changes: ‘La vieillesse, comme l’adolescence, prend toute la place dans le corps de qui l’héberge. Les vieux ne pensent qu’à la vieillesse, disent les pensionnaires de Florence’. (63) Detambel further hints at the necessity of bodily acceptance to (re)gain a balanced subjectivity: ‘il n’y a que les personnes âgées qui acceptent de se voir telles qu’elles sont alors que ceux qui ont encore la jeunesse ne sont que lâcheté et aveuglement. Marine a tout à y gagner.’ (63)

5.3.4 Suggesting other visions of the aged/different body

Detambel presents in *Mésanges* a reconfiguration of the structure of the retirement home. The collapse of physical and symbolic walls enables the communication with the outside and enhances the sense of comfort and security of the place (72) (The textual openness of the novel acts against claustrophobic restrictions to the human subject). The soothing contact with the residents, further explored in the expression of their honesty with regards to their bodies (63), denotes a harmonious relationship between aged people and their environment for a concordance between body and self. However, this text does not avoid the sensitive issue of corporeal senescence. In an unexpected episode in the retirement home, Detambel skillfully conveys to the reader a complex

amalgam of feelings (between shock, shame, guilt and voyeurism) as Laurent is confronted with his mother's incontinence. Florence resents this violation of privacy:

Florence le prend par le bras. Elle le pince. Elle a un regard courroucé, comme si Laurent avait assisté à quelque chose qui ne le regardait pas, qui fait partie des secrets de l'équipe soignante, comme l'administration d'un placebo ou la décision de donner de la morphine. (29)

The manager of the home continues: ““Vous savez que les visites ne sont pas autorisées le matin”, dit-elle parce qu'il faut absolument parler' (29). Despite the admitted need to re-establish the dialogue with Laurent, the accidental encounter does not hinder the links with the aged but on the contrary stresses the recognition for a more careful and human respect of privacy. Moreover, it underlines a more open, more fluid and inclusive approach to corporeal difference and fragility of the subject.

Through this fictive encounter, Detambel hints to the link between the respect of individual corporeal experiences and social (re)integration of the subject in her fictive depiction of old age. In the final part of this chapter, I focus on yet new configurations of the place of the aged subject in Detambel's *Noces de chêne*, in order to demonstrate how Detambel develops the multiple openings – institutional and textual – suggested here with *Mésanges*.

5.4 *Noces de chêne* : liberations from the disciplinary institution, abjection and monstrosity

This final section of Chapter 5 mirrors the structure of Part Two and provides architectural/theoretical equilibrium to my whole chapter; it offers an analytical reading of monstrous old age as depicted by Detambel in *Noces de chêne* (2008), a novel published five years after *Mésanges*. The title of the novel refers to the eightieth wedding anniversary, and also to the age of Taine, its protagonist. *Noces de chêne* envisages (the depiction of) old age differently: contrarily to *Mésanges*, the plot solely consists of the story of one aged character (not surrounded by younger people), and its individual approach permits recovering the subjectivity that was drowned in the mass disciplinary treatment of pensioners in *Le Long Séjour*. I will propose a reading of *Noces de chêne* with a novel (on young age), *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* (1998),⁴²⁴

⁴²⁴ Régine Detambel, *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998). References to this novel will be from the same edition and page numbers provided in brackets in the text.

and explore how Detambel's borrowing of extracts from the latter informs the transformation she proposes for her aged character in *Noces de chêne*.⁴²⁵

5.4.1 *The body of old age*

The astonishing interchangeability of characters (between an octogenarian male and a little girl) in a structure where place/function are determined by the subject's physical appearance, stresses Western's society's over-reliance on body image. Detambel calls for a return to a subjective, individual self-assessment, not defined by corporeal expectations. A dissociation between human subjectivity and the visual self (the body as we have learnt to regard it) is expressed as the main character's chronological age is depicted as relative: 'Il a quatre-vingts ans, l'âge d'un vieil éléphant, d'une jeune tortue, d'une maison ancienne, d'une église encore neuve, tout est relatif' (39). The importance of contextualisation when dealing with age reveals our reliance on learned appreciations. If eighty years old can be paralleled with the young and the new, therefore extracting the subject from widespread cliché constrictions of senescence, could other (visual) bodily factors be likewise abandoned when defining a human being? Detambel writes in *Le Syndrome de Diogène*:

Sont mis à l'écart tous les individus dont les attribus corporels ne correspondent plus aux normes en vigueur. L'éviction du champ social est un calvaire commun, la vieillesse un stigmat.⁴²⁶

I argue that re-possession of the body by the aged character and the subsequent debunking of its alleged limitations metaphorically remove the subject from confined spaces and pre-defined roles.

5.4.2 *Dangerous confinements to erase the monstrous aged body*

This section first presents initial reminiscences of the retirement home as a disciplinary institution and subsequent attempts to erase the expressions of senescent bodies. It will furthermore eventually denote the failing to contain the subjects made monstrous by their rejection.

⁴²⁵ This process of borrowing or recycling entire passages or whole novels is also found with *Notre-Dame des Sept Douleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), which reflects the fictive situation of *La Quatrième orange* (Paris: Julliard, 1992) and essentially proposes a rewriting of this novel.

⁴²⁶ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 30.

Noces de chêne reiterates the structural and disciplinary organisation of the retirement home and the overall relationship with its pensioners, as analysed in *Le Long Séjour*. Maria Signalet reluctantly enters the home when her body is deemed unfit for an autonomous existence: ‘Légère, décalcifiée, un bambou creux, toujours menacée par une fracture du fémur, Maria avait dû quitter son chez-soi pour la chambre 106 d’une maison de retraite’ (49). The aged lady is painfully uprooted from her dear house in Ventoux, which she recalls daily in her ‘chantier géopoétique’: ‘Sur le papier, elle revenait à ses paysages du Ventoux’ (45). While health and safety measures justify Maria’s loss of independence, her internment however causes her death.⁴²⁷ We read, ‘Après sa chute, Maria Signalet, veuve Hardy, est restée allongée sous l’escalier durant cent cinquante heures’ (11). The double confinement of the resident – ‘la première marche de l’escalier au-dessus d’elle était déjà comme un couvercle de cercueil’ (13) – warn against dangerous prejudices within the retirement home.⁴²⁸

Contrarily to the mistaken staff, her lover Taine believes that Maria has run away to her house in Ventoux, and breaks out to find her. However, whilst Taine is oblivious of Maria’s fatal imprisonment in the retirement home, the old man is haunted by ‘la blancheur de la maison de retraite [...] l’image blanche’ (42) and thinks that ‘L’odeur de mort est encore là’ (41). Maria cannot be rescued from her suffering – ‘Pendant des jours la mort s’est dérobée. Elle a fui puisque Maria la désirait’ (13) – as even death itself refuses her salvation. Lost under the stairs, her eventual ‘transformation tumultueuse en cadavre’ (14) represents the ultimate dehumanisation of residents (commonly referred to as room numbers (35)) in the overall process of their deletion.⁴²⁹ Furthermore, it highlights the contrast with Taine who escapes and is able to find other (textual) spaces in order to perform his search (for Maria, and for his identity).

⁴²⁷ A gender perspective could be envisaged as Maria, the female pensioner, falls victim to the retirement home’s carelessness while her friend Taine, a man, manages to escape the home. Maria also stands apart from her fellow residents as she possesses the abilities to both read and walk, which lead her to take an unusual path ‘de la bibliothèque au jardin’ (p. 12) and collapses where nobody expects her to be.

⁴²⁸ Detambel denounces the narrow-mindedness of the nursing staff, which engenders wrong deductions, via their physical inability to see the old lady: ‘la vieille était si bien dissimulée sous la première marche de l’escalier qu’il aurait fallu, au regard humain, ajouter des angles qui n’existent pas. C’est du moins ce que dit la directrice, au moment de l’enquête policière.’ (12)

⁴²⁹ ‘Une très vieille personne, si elle n’est pas partie, doit demeurer sur la pointe des pieds, en catimini, faire déjà un peu la morte avant de bientôt l’être tout à fait, ne pas importuner de sa présence insistante les plus vivants qu’elle. Faites-vous invisibles.’ (*Noces de chêne*, p. 28).

Various methods work to erase the presence of aged people. Similar to monsters, they are evicted from society and committed to institutions. Detambel concurs: ‘A la fois monstres et fossiles, ils sont les formes devenues lointaines et approximatives de l’identité humaine’.⁴³⁰ Interestingly in *Noces de chêne* we find another similar parallel:

Avachis, endormis, les coudes sur les genoux, les vieux ressemblent à des maisons basses. Le mutisme les recouvre comme un lierre, leur ombre fait un auvent sur le carrelage blanc. (51)

As they fall asleep, slowly losing consciousness and motion, residents are metaphorically turned into houses, into stones. Petrification further confines older people in cages of stone, as if helplessly facing their fate or a spell cast by widespread social rejection. Mythological considerations aside, petrification is also a natural process, a rare form of fossilisation involving a process of chemical transformation (mineralisation), a metaphor for the dehumanising physical and physiological changes of ageing.

5.4.3 Restricting monstrous behaviour: forbidden senescent sexuality

The control of monstrous old age in the disciplinary institution involves a (spatial) confinement of pensioners as well as restrictions concerning their behaviour and the expression of intimate feelings. In *Noces de chêne*, senescent sexuality is not (freely) performed in the retirement home, it is a form of performed monstrosity which leads to feelings of self-alienation and rejection for the constricted subject.

These monstrous aged bodies are victims of neglect and oblivion, ‘formes [...] lointaines et approximatives de l’identité humaine’; however, Detambel links human identity with individual desires, journeys and specificities: ‘L’identité est dans les traits du visage, dans le désir du sexe, et dans les empreintes du bout des doigts’.⁴³¹ *Noces de chêne* tackles the sensitive issue of senescent sexuality between Taine and Maria – ‘Et cette petite vieille, Taine la désire’ (15) – to denounce ‘l’un des derniers bastions de la haine de la vieillesse’. Detambel continues: ‘le tabou sexuel fai[t] de l’abstention ou de l’abstinence de certains vieillards, tenues comme allant de soi, le symétrique de l’angélisme enfantin’.⁴³² Detambel explores how senescent sexuality is often seen as a

⁴³⁰ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 12.

⁴³¹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 11.

⁴³² Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 53-4.

perversion, treated with ‘des comprimés émoullients’⁴³³ (or met in *Le Long Séjour* with ‘ricane[ments]’ and otherwise ‘fou rire’ (35-36)). In an article entitled ‘Sexuality in institutionalized elderly persons’, Lieslot Mahieu and Chris Gastmans reveal the result of a quantitative study conducted on the topic of senescent sexuality in retirement homes. They explain that ‘the sexual interest of elderly residents might easily be perceived to be a behavioral problem rather than the expression of a basic human need for love and intimacy’. The authors of the article moreover note that admission to a retirement home ‘does not automatically diminish their need and desire for sexual fulfillment’.⁴³⁴ We read in *Noces de chêne*:

Contre le désespoir, le bouleversement, l’éblouissement, l’enchantement du désir, la curiosité têtue de découvrir le corps de l’autre, le besoin des entretiens à mi-voix, d’une bouche sur la bouche. Le bonheur supprime la vieillesse. (27)

Like a disease, the expansion of feelings is controlled in the retirement home (a new build) with ‘cloisons insonorisées’ and ‘portes en verre dépoli’ (17) as everything is ‘soumis à la stérélisation des émotions elles-mêmes’ (16). The perpetual effort to control residents’ bodies also infiltrates the regency of their emotions, guardians of well-behaved subjects. Hygiene and architecture watch over the communication of feelings, and the nursing personnel ensures the limitation of intimate encounters:

Mêlez-vous aux autres, sortez de votre coin. Il n’y a de pure joie que la joie publique. Le repli sur soi, le lyrisme de l’intériorité qui habite quelques vieux poètes sont des amorces de haute trahison. Ici, pas d’ours, pas de misanthrope, pas de solitaire, pas d’amoureux. (28)

Weary of the potential threat (treason) of senescent sexuality, this ultimate form of disobedience justifies the recourse to medical arguments:

Inutile d’aller vous enfermer tous les deux. Que feriez-vous dans une petite chambre, porte close ? Alors comment seriez-vous surveillés ? Et s’il vous arrivait quelque chose ? Un évanouissement ou une attaque, par exemple ? (28)

Detambel alludes to a possible re-negotiation of our understanding of the aged (body) ; she writes that, ‘Une femme de ménage, qui a trente ans, les a vus ensemble dans la

⁴³³ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, p. 263.

⁴³⁴ Lieslot Mahieu and Chris Gastmans, ‘Sexuality in institutionalized elderly persons: a systematic review of argument-based ethics literature’, *International Psychogeriatrics*, 24 (2012), 346-57 (p. 346).

chambre 107. Elle a souri. Dans ses lèvres, il y avait du respect, du mystère, de la paillardise et des ménagements.’ (27). However, the violent reaction of ‘l’auxiliaire de vie rousse’ is a demonstration of a deep-seated repulsion of the inconceivable. We read: ‘Elle hurla après eux comme on traite deux chiens qui copulent, comme si l’amour en eux n’était qu’une espèce de sécrétion corrompue et malsaine’ (74). Processes of intimidation, guilt and other threats are implemented as the aged couple is put under surveillance.⁴³⁵ The dehumanising animal comparison goes to disquieting extents to curtail the unacceptable outpourings: ‘Quel plaisir peut-on trouver à une telle peau, à jouer à la bête à deux dos avec une vieille à deux dents ?’ (74).

The reprimanding monstrous portrayal mocks the physical shortcomings enhanced by prohibited behaviour. Corporeal and performative monstrosities intersect when the aged body is rendered still more unacceptable by physical love. Moreover, as I show in the next section, the association of senescent sexuality with the ambivalence of the monstrous – our subsequent reactionary rejection, and the impossibility of containing it⁴³⁶ – forewarns of an outburst from these unconstrained bodies, signified by expressions of senescent sexuality. Senescent sexuality is the performative expression of the aged body outside the norms. It moreover exemplifies the repossession of one’s body (and agentivity) via the actions it performs. The uncontained body symbolically announces the forthcoming escape of these unlawful subjects. Taine and Maria voice their desire to escape their constricted space – ‘On va foutre le camp d’ici’ (37) – which points to the (textual) openings suggested in and via *Noces de chêne*. These bodies and their actions are signifiers of social rejection, and of the recuperation of corporeal and also exterior spaces: they represent how Detambel’s novel opens up creative spaces for these subjects, and to envisage other ways of being in the body.

5.4.4 *Reconfigurations of (corporeal) identity between two stories*

This final section discusses processes of recuperation of agentivity for the subject via multiple stages and expressions of bodily hardships, death and rebirth. Ultimately, I will

⁴³⁵ ‘Jamais ils n’osèrent reparler de l’oeil courroucé de la jeune femme en blouse sur leur désir insensé et dégradant.’ I cite also the following extract which adds the factor of moral responsibility: ‘Et que diraient leurs familles, si elles les voyaient ainsi se conduire en vieux cochons ?’ (74).

⁴³⁶ Shildrick, p. 17.

allow me to conclude on the (potential) re-positing and even displacement of subject in open/textual spaces.

The demonstration of physical love at an age where such impulses should nominally have been extinguished calls for a new consideration of the aged body and self, and the way we survey corporeal spaces and their lived expression. It revisits widespread (controlling) clichés about the existing needs and desires of the aged, debunking alleged incapacities,⁴³⁷ without concealing their natural physical limitations (68-72). As Taine escapes the retirement home ‘par un trou de la haie, comme les chats’ (39), the simultaneous empowerment of corporeal and external spaces is intoxicating and bewildering: ‘Il a un vertige. [...] Il vient de passer d’un seul coup du limité à l’immense, du plafonné à l’intarissable’ (40). Set free unprepared in the unforgiving nature of Provence, the aged man’s journey to find his beloved Maria is situated somewhere between the *Bildungsroman*, the Temptation of Christ in the desert, and a voyage of rebirth:

On peut croire que le coucher du soleil est endormissement, sénescence, mort. Alors, par analogie, on nomme crépuscule de la vie cet âge qui jouxte l’obscurité. Or il existe deux crépuscules : cette lueur modeste, qui précède le lever du soleil, s’évoque sous le nom de crépuscule du matin. (65)

The promise of a new beginning romantically requires various bodily hardships – hunger, fatigue, pain, even close death (85-87) – for the character to symbolically recreate himself, and be reborn.

The dialogue between subjectivity and corporeal/external spaces is taken to another extent as the aged character is once more confined to another (Foucauldian) model of body/space/function. As I argue, the parallels with another novel by Detambel, and the subsequent transformations between characters and their roles across these texts, simultaneously constrict and offer liberation (openings) for the subject. Taine is confined in (alienating) stories from which he can solely escape via the reconfiguration of his own body-self relationship.

The process is announced as the aged man succumbs to the difficulties of the quest and the terrain. Taine accidentally falls into a ravine and weak, lost, begins to lose himself (79-81); moments later, the first extra-textual parallels transport the aged man to

⁴³⁷ Taine’s fearless desire to brave the natural elements to find Maria comes to contrast the aged pensioner’s supposed bedridden invalidity in *Le Long Séjour* (48).

another story, another character. Almost literal borrowings from *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* associate Taine with the little girl in the other novel by Detambel.⁴³⁸

Metamorphoses are further explored as Taine is symbolically drowned by his love for Maria, and by herself:

L'amour de Maria l'emporte. Des pieds à la tête, le voilà tout entier Maria Seignalet. Il est las d'être lui-même. Le coeur lui échappe. Sa bouche pleine de sang. Tout entier devenu Maria. Taine s'éclipse. Il ne dit plus qu'un seul mot : Maria. (85)

The delirious old man finds the reunification with his beloved through the surrounding vegetation which he assimilates as Maria – ‘Alors il cueille tout ce qui pousse dans la circonférence de ses bras’ – and amorously consumes her – ‘Jusqu’à la nuit, il frotte contre ses lèvres des pétales bleus, des pétales rouges’ (85). However, the effusive indirect recapture of his lost love proves to be lethal. He owes his narrow escape to Vitalie: ‘Elle connaît sa tâche de rebouteuse: à proprement parler réveiller les morts et ressouder ce qui a été brisé’ (87). Situated between the chiropractor and the physiotherapist, the bonesetter draws her skills from folklore and primordial traditions. During four days (90-91) Vitalie patiently heals the aged man (the escapee fearing recapture more than death (87-88)): ‘Vitalie ouvre un couteau de chasse et se met au travail de rouge. Elle saigne le vieux au coude. “Tu vas respirer mieux.”’ (89). Symbolically, she cuts open the body ‘d’un blême empoisonné’ – ‘Taine a déjà vaporisé trois kilos et demi d’humanité dans l’atmosphère terrestre’ (90) – and resorts to various herbal remedies, pagan prayers and archaic practices (91), taking the character back in time, to recreate him. As the bonesetter is furthermore a practitioner of joint manipulation, she re-assembles (the body of) the aged man, she invents new articulations between the two novels, symbolically creating a new textual/bodily entity. Her techniques, like her character, find their distant origins in another time, another (hi)story, creating at the end of *Noces de chêne* a parenthesis in space-time.

The introduction of Vitalie – a new female character (and her links with the other text) – at the advanced stage in the plot in *Noces de chêne* reinforces the parallels between the two novels. The character of Taine is “transported” into the story in *Elle ferait battre les montagnes*. Just as *Noces de chêne* denounces the constraining (socially) established criterion of the aged, *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* also portrays a family fascinated

⁴³⁸ See *Noces de chêne* (83) and *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* (62-63).

by the beauty of a little girl (and the visible signs of her childishness) and shows a concern with body image and social constructions (restrictions) of corporeal identity:

En vérité, si on lui posait ce chapeau sur les cheveux, même les jours où le soleil paraissait seulement sous forme de gloires entre les nuages, c'est qu'ils avaient entendu dire, tous, dans la maison de campagne [...] que les chapeaux vont particulièrement aux fillettes bouclées et font ressortir leurs boucles parce que la lumière jaune, très diluée, filtrée par la paille du chapeau, peint une auréole éclatante sur des cheveux déjà rendus légers et transparents par le contre-jour. (11-12)

The child's body ('Elle était une petite déesse de moelle, de chair et d'eau fraîche' (13)) and most importantly her hair signify the innocence of childhood. The straw hat is the prop that completes the character, and subsequently confines her in a definite role to play. However, her cousin impulsively takes her to the hairdresser and Detambel writes of the disappearance of the child (95); on their return, her great-aunt ('Tatie') immediately asks: 'Qu'est-ce que tu as fait à tes cheveux, où est ton chapeau?' (100). He has deprived the child of her golden crown: 'La coupe avait eu l'effet d'une terrible opération chirurgicale. L'enfant semblait morte à jamais. Le rôle capital et unique que jouait sa chevelure avait disparu.' (112) Dethroned, the child is a fallen angel, dehumanised and rejected: 'Elle fut à la fois touchée comme une poupée et repoussée comme un monstre décevant' (111).

Despite Taine's revival in the ravine, Vitalie discourages him to resume his search for Maria: 'son corps n'est pas prêt' and 'il doit s'installer chez elle quelque temps' (92-93). Dispossessed of his few belongings and with no identification document (93), Taine is simultaneously freed from former constricting roles, but also deprived of his personal history and identity. Detambel writes in *Le Syndrome de Diogène* of the importance of using family names when dealing with aged people:

Ne pas subsumer les patronymes sous le concept de "vieux", mais épanouir en chacun, à travers les syllabes de son nom, une personne singulière. Je t'ai appelé par ton nom, je vais te libérer.

Reminding the resident of their name is 'lui rappeler sans cesse qu'il a à naître et renaître infiniment, avec obstination, qu'il existe, qu'il est homme qui vient, toujours en arrivance, jamais arrivé'.⁴³⁹ We could argue that Vitalie freezes the development of the

⁴³⁹ Detambel, *Le Syndrome de Diogène*, pp. 123-24.

aged character when she uproots him from his personal history, and also as she leads him to yet another complex constricted space: her house.

At this point in *Noces de chêne*, up until the final chapter, the domestic existence of Taine and Vitalie is evoked in a bounded (even claustrophobic) narrative parenthesis. The glaring parallels and direct borrowings from *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* are manifold. First announced in the ravine as Vitalie is mistaken for Maria and the little girl – ‘Elle porte un chapeau de paille orné d’une cerise’ (*Noces de chêne*, 88) – they blossom completely (from page 95) when Taine comes to live with Vitalie. Most disconcertingly, both Vitalie and Taine constantly borrow and swap places with the characters in *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* a story constructed on models of body/place/function ceaselessly (re)placing Taine in constricting positions and roles to play. As the aged man seems bound to yet another confining story and consequently loses his sense of self, Vitalie accentuates his confusion and lures him into staying with her, as her lover. Homeopath and apprentice witch, Vitalie’s initial health preoccupations (101-102) evolve as she concocts various potions and remedies to fatten, stun and even intoxicate her protégé (102; 117-8). Vitalie now embodies the noisy and insensitive nursing personnel, and ‘Taine se réveille en sursaut. Il se croit encore à la maison de retraite’ (105). The weight of the diverse constrictions recall Taine’s former prison, and of the vital need to leave: ‘le goût de la fugue tourne maintenant autour de Taine’ (103). In the conclusion to this chapter, I unveil how the ending of *Noces de chêne* suggests that in Detambel’s writing, the texts I explored open up different possibilities of subjectivity in terms of characters “under construction” and whose corporeal identities are constantly changing.

5.5. Conclusion: new (textual) spaces for different possibilities of subjectivity

Taine refuses the manipulations on his body that seek to install him in a pre-defined role to play; the re-possession of his body (via the refuted function imposed by Vitalie) enables the character to recover the hold over his space. I argue that the text provides an opening, a creative space to rethink the relationship between the body and notions of identity. ‘Une nuit, il quitte Vitalie. Il vide presque le réfrigérateur, il emporte le pain dans un sac en plastique’ (121). Better equipped for his next journey, and in contrast with the uncertain/unprepared breakout from the retirement home, Taine confidently takes ownership of his (corporeal and external) space: he quits the constricted environment, and the narrative parenthesis of *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* is equally brought to a

close. ‘Le proverbe dit : c’est à la troisième fois que tu réussiras à monter sur ton cheval’ (122-23). After several attempts to “reconstruct” himself, Taine is now a subject in full possession of his body, therefore able to control his space, his way. Symbolically, he leaves Vitalie’s home on a snowy twilight, before the start of the day, and when no path is visible.

La neige n’arrête pas un seul parcours mais elle ouvre une diversité de tracés entre lesquels l’œil peut choisir puisqu’il n’y a pas, pour satisfaire le regard, d’image arrêtée, accomplie, mais seulement le gonflement de sa naissance. (122)

The necessity for perpetual re-creation is emphasised by the presence of the snow, ‘un protagoniste essentiel à travailler de ses pas, à la fois comme un pigment et comme une matière.’ (122) The aged man has reconquered his bodily space and his agentivity and must now, through the drawing of his path, sculpt his relation to the world. Whilst the aged subject is depicted as monstrous because of the corporeal limits and demands imposed on the disciplinary institution, symbolically, the subject who has left fled this structure is allowed to construct a new approach to the body. The novel thus finishes: ‘Plénitude de l’image ouverte, mouvante et lacunaire, sous les salves de la neige’ (123).

However, only a full corporeal/self recapture will posit the subject in an open space, a metaphor for one’s reconquered subjectivity. In a section entitled ‘*Un exilé qui dit: “Où?”*’, Kristeva advocates a similar questioning: ‘Au lieu de s’interroger sur son “être”, il [‘Celui par lequel l’abject existe [... le] jeté’] s’interroge sur sa place: “Où suis-je?” plutôt que “Qui suis-je?”’ For the abject character, the essential heterogeneity of his/her space necessitates their perpetual delimitation in an attempt to protect the self; ‘Bâtitteur infatigable, le jeté est en somme un égaré.’⁴⁴⁰ Taine’s reconquered spaces annihilate the abjection of senescence. Detambel’s heroic aged escapee and his self-recovery of space moreover suggest the possibility for a more accessible individual equilibrium. The individual scale of space and the potential for body/self renegotiation presents to all human beings the possibility for freedom and rebirth within the text: ‘Fais-toi un bagage d’exilé et pars en exil sous leurs yeux’, dares Detambel.⁴⁴¹ The challenge of changing the image and the place of the aged subject is effectuated by the multiple openings in Detambel’s texts. From her first depiction of old age in *Le Long Séjour*, to *Mésanges* and finally *Noces de chêne*, these texts create space from which to

⁴⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁴¹ Detambel quotes from the book of Ezekiel in *Le syndrome de Diogène*, p. 233.

explore alternative modes of becoming, beyond disciplinary constrictions, and towards other ways of being in the body.

The openness at the end of *Noces the chène* may be said to represent an empty space, for Detambel and for others writers, to re-explore through literary representation the constricting limits and demands imposed onto subjects within our society. Detambel proposes to continue the creation of her character and to write new stories for aged individuals, to look forward into the future in which we may decide to approach differently the differences caused during old age, and indeed during any stage of the human lifecycle. Detambel's aged subject is a subject perpetually "under construction", therefore simply a human subject who is constantly changing – 'La loi de la vie, c'est de changer' reminds Beauvoir⁴⁴² – and asking for new (textual) spaces in which to evolve.

Whilst the reassessment of France's monstrosity (explored in my previous chapter) can only happen post-mortem and is therefore limited, for Taine this reassessment is part of his life (his life depends on it). As Taine also evokes the restrictions imposed on individuals in other (earlier) episodes of the human lifespan (and in this thesis), the possibility of exploring new attitudes towards old age evokes the possibility of a similar move towards the acceptance of people stigmatised by illness, and who fail to meet the strict standards of physical propriety. New perceptions on the monstrous sibling could emerge, and of adolescent transformations, and by extension modifying the very imposition of physical standards in our contemporary society. The changed perception of the monstrous is therefore a changed perception on what constitutes the human subject who has been transformed (and experienced forms of rejection) during the various episodes of the human lifespan.

⁴⁴² Beauvoir, p. 17.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Restricting the (monstrous) subject: a review of the disciplinary system

The four authors whose works I have examined in this thesis have each provided singular and highly creative approaches to monstrosity in their texts. They have utilised monstrosity as a means of interrogating changing models of corporeal identity, which they have explored through subjects undergoing various physical and psychological changes typical of some stages in the human lifecycle. Monstrosity has manifested itself differently in each case studied: in Nothomb's text, the portrayal of an anorexic dancer who metaphorically metamorphoses into a bird shows a self-disciplined docile body who has gone beyond the limits of the human body, in a disciplinary institution where the rules make it impossible for human beings to exist. The exploration of the monstrous sick subject in Nobécourt's writing has revealed another form of monstrosity; the hybridity of this character goes alongside a feeling of internal possession by an Other, and feelings of abjection, caused by the social and self-rejection of the visible traces of her difference inscribed on her body and in her behaviour. My analysis of Lambrichs's text has demonstrated that monstrosity is not always directly connected with visual markers of difference on the body; analysing the portrayal of Elise, I uncovered that her abjection, her hybridity and her monstrosity are a consequence of her parents' expectations of reproduction and their relationship with their daughter. Concerning France, she is also ultimately deemed an unsuccessful reproduction, and seen as abject and monstrous because she was created to serve specific purposes that she cannot fulfil. Finally, I have shown that in Detambel's writing, the monstrosity caused by old age is connected with feelings of abjection by the aged subject, and with society's attempt to distance itself from these aged individuals in disciplinary institutions, and from the "disgusting" metamorphoses that come with old age.

Despite the varied manifestations of monstrosity in these texts, in all cases examined, the monstrous is a construct of society as framed and shaped by the disciplinary institution. Indeed, my chapters are framed by reproductions of the disciplinary institution; as such, I have drawn on Foucault's theorisation of the disciplining of subjects to explore fictive representations of the disciplinary institution. In all the texts I have analysed, authors have explored (and criticised) how our

contemporary society relies on disciplinary methods to impose corporeal and behavioural norms onto subjects, and how these standards can collide with (and even prevent) typical physical and psychological transformations that occur during the human lifecycle. The consequential emergence of the monstrous embodies the tensions that erupt between the imposition of norms of visual propriety and human subjects whose changeable corporeal identities are often incompatible with socially imposed limits and demands.

In Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, I explored Nothomb's and Detambel's depictions of fully-fledged disciplinary institutions, and I laid out the methods by which corporeal norms are imposed onto subjects. In Chapter 2 specifically, I analysed in detail the articulation of rules of body-space-function in the Foucauldian disciplinary system in order to show how the subject (Plectrude the dancer) is transformed into a self-disciplined docile body in the strict environment of the Opera school of dance. Whilst undergoing a complete brainwashing and physical manipulations (bordering on torture) under the harsh rules of the establishment, the character who gradually becomes anorexic by following (and indeed exceeding) the rules of the establishment stands as an embodiment of the dangers that lie within the disciplinary system. Moreover, Plectrude's metaphorical metamorphosis signals her leaving her human body and human identity; this subsequently shows that the disciplinary institution is no place for human subjects and highlights the unsustainability (as a place for people) of the disciplinary system. I concluded the analysis of the articulations of power in the dance school with the ultimate transformation of the docile subject into a self-disciplined member of the institution. In Foucault's terms, the power of the institution reaches its apogee as it becomes a-corporeal, when it is no longer necessary to 'surveiller' or 'punir' subjects (via their bodies), because these subjects now willingly and independently follow the rules previously imposed onto them by figures of authority (teachers) in the institution. In *Robert des noms propres*, Nothomb stages her own reflection upon a-corporeality, with her character who becomes anorexic. A result of a dancer's desire to achieve the much-coveted step of 'envol', Plectrude's anorexia profoundly disturbs the already unstable relationship between the subject and her body, indeed already rendered more precarious in transitional age periods such as adolescence.

Old age is another period in the life cycle explored in this thesis where bodily and psychological transformations require the subject to re-evaluate the relationship between his/her changing body and identity. This is acutely expressed by Detambel in

Mésanges as she writes that, ‘La vieillesse, comme l’adolescence, prend toute la place dans le corps de qui l’héberge. Les vieux ne pensent qu’à la vieillesse, disent les pensionnaires de Florence’ (63). I have observed that subjects in periods of life which directly precede and follow adult age – adolescence and old age – are particularly under the scrutiny of the disciplinary system. In Chapter 5, I returned to (re-)explore another fictive representation of a fully-fledged disciplinary institution (the retirement home) and to show evolutions envisaged by Detambel in its functioning and in its rapport with fragile aged subjects. I unveiled how pensioners (like dancers) are uprooted from their familiar environment and their sense of time so as to initiate the transformation into docile bodies and eventually into self-disciplined subjects. Reading three novels on old age by Detambel, I showed how these aged characters’ learned habits in the retirement home translate the establishment’s policies on hygiene and health of its members and also society’s desire to distance itself from bodies seen as disgusting and abject. The failure to treat subjects in accordance with the bodily needs and abilities of a given age and to accommodate its physical transformations worsen the subject’s own difficulty to recognise him/herself and accept their evolving corporeal identities. The aged subject in the retirement home (which follows a disciplinary approach towards pensioners) is indeed at great risk of self-rejection, and of becoming monstrous. Detambel’s evolving representation of the treatment of old age is expressed in the welcoming structure for the care of the aged in her second text I analysed (*Mésanges*) and more theatrically in the third novel (*Noces de chêne*) when her aged character escapes the retirement home and overthrows the physical and ideological limits of the disciplinary institution. The author’s texts suggest a modified and more inclusive approach towards corporeal difference and bodily changes, in later and indeed in all periods of the human lifespan; they open up new avenues to rethink how we may relate to one’s and others’ corporeal changes and differences, and how we may learn to see them as “human” and no longer “monstrous”.

In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I unveiled how other less formally organised social structures like the family also function as disciplinary institutions in their imposition of norms and expectations to family members. The families depicted in the texts by Nobécourt and Lambrichs that I analysed rely on the principles of body-place-function at the core of the Foucauldian system of discipline, and corporeal norms dictate how family members interact with one another. The rejection of physical difference in society permeates the family sphere, and is carried out by siblings and by the monstrous

subject him/herself. As such, I turned to psychoanalysis and relied more specifically on Kristeva's theories of abjection in order to explore the dynamics of self-rejection in these texts. Indeed, the corpus of texts selected for analysis in Chapter 3 and 4 proved particularly suited to determining how subjects who fail to meet the corporeal and behavioural norms of their context are often bound to replicate this social rejection and become victims of abjection and self-rejection. The subject of Nobécourt's texts I analysed, Irène, is a clear instance of a monstrous subject caught between self-rejection and her own rejection of society. Irène's desire to investigate the otherness that she perceives lying beneath her skin (and which she believes effects her rejection) and later her experiment to articulate it in writing, is a misguided attempt to rid herself of her singularity instead of learning to encompass it as part of her corporeal identity. As a self-disciplined docile body, Irène has been taught that her corporeal difference is not socially acceptable; whether or not she blames others, her family or society for their intolerance, ultimately, she cannot herself come to terms with her visible difference (in contrast with the subject in *L'Equarrissage* who, to some extent, manages to find through writing a creative access to her corporeal singularity and a way to make it her own). Unable to be socially within the norms, the subject's defiance of the rules of visual propriety, and ultimately of social and moral conduct (as she commits murder), is represented via her monstrosity in which she "abandons" herself. Similarly to Nothomb's monstrous character, Irène's transformation is untenable; she is removed from societal existence as her bodily transgressions have gone beyond her own body to reach/endanger that of others.

Illness, but also reproduction, is an episode in the human lifespan where social institutions govern notions of corporeal propriety and impose rules onto the subject. In Chapter 4, I showed that whether reproduction is highly controlled or left uncontrolled, it is always loaded with parental expectations. Reading Lambrichs's text, I analysed how such different cases of reproduction both resulted in the creation of monstrous characters. As I announced in the introduction to that chapter, these monstrous characters would offer different challenges to those explored in the previous two chapters, being less visible than the metamorphosing dancer or the animal/plant invasion. As their monstrosity could not be solely identified by extraordinary physiques and a-moral behaviour, I predicted a new way of expressing monstrosity in Lambrichs's text. It was still deeply connected with self-rejection and with abjection, but also a form of monstrosity that erupted (or could fade) almost unexpectedly and therefore highlighted the importance of narrative perspective and reassessment in the text. As I

will further develop in a later part of this Conclusion, the monstrosity explored in Chapter 4 fulfils a double role: it stands in continuity with the cases of monstrous subjects studied before (Plectrude, Irène and Elise are shown as monstrous “for all” in their contexts) and it also operates a turn in the thesis argument and a stepping stone towards further reassessments of monstrosity suggested by Detambel and in Chapter 5. Still, like all other monstrous characters explored in this thesis, those in Lambrichs’s writing are always victims of the constricting system of their creation. Yet again, the family sphere – its members, endemic rules, and even the limits of the family estate – is strongly reminiscent of a disciplinary structure. In that chapter, I showed that reproduction functions as a social institution: in Lambrichs’s text, the parents’ expectations on reproduction provide rules by which the offspring are judged and which influence how parents interact with their children. Elise is the product of a “natural” uncontrolled reproduction, deemed unsuccessful as she fails to meet her parents’ expectations of her as a daughter. I showed that the unhealthy and violent parent-child relationship and that between siblings lead the mentally retarded child to seek refuge in alternative physical and psychological spaces. Beaten and rejected because of her differences, Elise cannot exist in the world of her family (expressed via her hybrid and monstrous transformations) nor can she develop into a healthy adult: she is left to withdraw into the securing but abject and constricting world of the maternal. On the other hand, France the clone is the result of a highly technical manipulation to counter the sterility of her “mother”. Jean her “father” avows his difficulty to position himself in relation to France as an individual in her own right. However, as France fails to fulfil the role for which she was created, she is portrayed by Jean as a monstrous character and rejected (murdered) as an unsuccessful reproduction. The final revelation of Jean as a monstrous character himself casts a doubt on his whole story and by extension on the monstrosity of the subject he rejects: France. Despite the possibility of rereading Jean’s story, it is only really possible to re-think France’s monstrosity (and not Elise’s), and both subjects remain restricted by the parental expectations of reproduction and by the rules of a social institution. This indicates the limits of the reassessment of monstrosity in *A ton image*, but it nonetheless paves the way for further reconsiderations of monstrosity in Chapter 5, especially as Detambel’s texts fundamentally question the disciplinary system that makes subjects monstrous.

To close the concluding remarks on the disciplinary treatment of monstrosity, I shall briefly reflect on the aspect of imprisonment (on which Foucault initially based his

theory in *Surveiller et punir*) and question whether the texts I have analysed signal a possibility of escape from the institution, and maybe via monstrosity. The most obvious instance is provided in Detambel's novel: despite the varied restrictions to the aged body in the retirement home, one pensioner overthrows widespread assumptions about old age and impotence, and escapes the disciplinary institution. Conversely, the young Nothombian dancer willingly joins the institution and she does not escape but faces eviction because of physical inability. In all cases, the notion of "freedom" from the disciplinary institution remains questionable: Taine may no longer be a monstrous and abject character but he remains outside society. Following her recovery from anorexia, Plectrude re-inserts herself into different structures (her family, her deceased mother's path), which, like the disciplinary institution, govern her vision of her body and her actions. She embodies the effects of the a-corporeal power within the institution: despite being outside its walls, the institutional hold on the psychologically manipulated subject remains. It is therefore tempting to consider the monstrous as a rebellion or escape from constricting corporeal rules. For anorexic Plectrude, the bird metamorphosis is a fantasised but unsustainable form of escape; for Irène, the "liberating" nature of her voluntary abandonment into monstrosity is also problematic and ends with the incarceration of the subject; finally for Elise her monstrosity is not synonymous with liberation as the character eventually commits suicide.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I laid out two main approaches to the monstrous, either as a label, or as a prism. In the light of the textual analyses I have undertaken and of the conclusions drawn thus far, I therefore advance that whenever monstrosity is envisaged within society's disciplinary framework and in terms of otherness and difference – in short, when it functions as a label – it does not offer liberation but rather closes down corporeal possibilities for the subject. This recalls Foucault's position, who writes that 'Il n'y a de monstruosité que là où le désordre de la loi naturelle vient toucher, bousculer, inquiéter le droit, que ce soit le droit civil, le droit canonique, le droit religieux'.⁴⁴³ However, whenever monstrosity begins to function as a prism for the exploration of other/changing possibilities of being in the body – that is, when the monstrous is envisaged as a creative approach to the human – then it becomes possible to think productively about multifarious human corporeal identities.

6.2 Creative reassessments: rewriting and rereading monstrosity

⁴⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux. Cours au Collège de France, 1974-1975*, ed. by François Ewald and others (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 1999), p. 59.

The diverse monstrous characters in the texts by Detambel, Lambrichs, Nobécourt and Nothomb are manifestations of the recent re-negotiations to corporeal representation by the 1990s generation of French women writers. They translate multiple fears and anxieties around ways of being in the body in our contemporary society, and show how these four authors have chosen to address issues of bodily changes and corporeal difference, when they become visible to one's body and on the bodies of others. Outside this study, none of these new bodies have been approached from the angle of the monstrous, a perspective which, I contend, allows productive questionings on existential notions such as the body and identity, subjects in society, and self-other relations. Throughout this thesis, a question has underpinned my analysis: how can authors whose texts may be said to re-think and offer rewritings of monstrosity (by approaching it, describing it, and staging it differently) avoid ultimately reproducing the constrictions and limitations of which monstrous subject are born? In the first section of this Conclusion, my overview of the multiple textual representations of the disciplinary institution revealed the omnipresence of this system when dealing with subjects deemed monstrous. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, the monstrous characters are situated within fully-fledged disciplinary institutions; in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the monstrous characters evolve outside its walls in other similarly regulated social structures, but in these monsters' stories, they finish in custodial establishments. Reproductions of the disciplinary institution therefore frame my chapters, and indeed these monsters' stories, but without restricting them. It is my position that for the authors in my corpus, their textual monsters are systematically situated in fictive representations of the disciplinary institution so as to expose and challenge widespread normalising approaches towards corporeal difference and bodily changes in our contemporary society. The texts I analysed not only portray the omnipresence and diverse declensions of the disciplinary institution throughout society, they also question the validity of this system and its adaptability when dealing with multiple (and often vulnerable because constantly transforming) human beings.

In the texts I analysed, their authors find multiple creative ways to counter the restrictions imposed by the disciplinary institution. I have concluded above that characters cannot fully escape the hold of the disciplinary institution, and that monstrosity is not in itself a tenable form of liberation for the subject. If the escape of the pensioner indeed represents the most "accomplished" form of evasion of the

disciplinary institution (and arguably the bolder demonstration of its limits), the re-integration of the aged subject in societal modes of existence remains to be written by the author and rethought by the reader. This escape is actually a *mise en scène* of other suggestions by all four authors in my corpus to re-think different avenues of corporeal identities and wider social restrictions. I claim that in all the texts explored in this study authors have combined a double approach to the monstrous, firstly by criticising society's labelling of otherness and difference and the disciplinary approach to monstrosity, and also by considering monstrosity as a prism which opens possibilities for subjects and invites more re-interpretations (rereadings) of what may constitute corporeal difference.

These two aspects figure differently and more or less strongly in each text I explored. What predominates in *Robert des noms propres* is the concept of the constricted subject under institutional hold and the notion that all members in society are under some form of institutional authority. Plectrude's transformation into a monstrous character points to the unsustainability and limits of the disciplinary system, in which her monstrous metamorphosis is the result of corporeal degradation and brings about her rejection. If indeed the first aspect I evoked above – the portrayal and criticism of the disciplinary system in which monstrosity functions as a label – dominates in Nothomb's text, it is nonetheless possible to unveil a first move towards the necessity to re-interpret, or rewrite, monsters' stories. In my conclusion to Chapter 2, I proposed two interpretations of the final episode in the story, when Plectrude meets a character named Amélie Nothomb who reveals to Plectrude her innate destiny to become a murderer. This could be read as an instance of control of the subject comparable to former disciplinary models in the story. Indeed, Plectrude is led to commit murder, which arguably makes her monstrous (again, if differently) and announces yet more (judicial) constriction of the subject. On the other hand, the murder of the textually inscribed author may also be read as a desire for the subject to begin to write her own story and explore other (non-disciplinary) approaches to the monstrous, and therefore pointing towards the elimination of textual and indeed all forms of constriction of the monstrous.

My reading of *La Démangeaison* has exposed the victimising consequences of society's imposition of norms of corporeal propriety onto subjects, which revealed Nobécourt's portrayal and criticism of the disciplinary institution. As Irène turns to writing, she resorts to words to expulse her rage and subsequently only re-enacts society's disgust and rejection of her difference; indeed, writing does not allow her to

re-think her own bodily difference as her enterprise is misguided. I have also explored how the character's revelation of multiple lies calls into question the whole story and may invite the reader to reread Irène's story. However, the mirroring structures between the first and final lines in *La Démangeaison* symbolically entrap (and lose) the reader in countless rereadings of the text, which may cancel the possibility for new readings of her monstrosity. Literary reassessments of corporeal difference are more effectively demonstrated in *L'Equarrissage*. Nobécourt's subject's investigation into language represents her own search for identity; the reader who is taken along her journey of self-discovery indirectly carries out him/herself the process of re-evaluation of monstrosity and corporeal difference.

Contrary to Nothomb's and Nobécourt's texts, *A ton image* does not offer an exposition of the disciplinary institution, and the criticism of this system is only indirectly conveyed in Lambrichs's text. Reproduction is portrayed as a social institution that creates victims but the constriction of its subjects is not fully challenged. Rather, what sets this text apart, and offers a progression in my exploration of representations of monstrous subjects, is that in *A ton image*, monstrosity is less visibly identifiable and often questionable, which in turn invites re-questionings and therefore reassessment of monstrosity. The "opening" towards new forms of corporeal identities is contained in the possibility of rereading the story and to undertake a reassessment of monstrosity. As Jean has sex with and strangles to death his "daughter" France, the violence of his act turns him into a monster (arguably the "real" monster in the story). Subsequently, the reliability of his story is called into question and with it his ability to determine monstrosity in others. Lambrichs's text offers a choice to the reader: to decide whether Jean is a trustworthy character (or at least a victim whose crimes should be forgiven) or whether his actions stand as a representation of the imposition of demands onto subjects and the rejection of their shortcomings. In this latter assessment, France appears as the victim and her monstrosity may be reread and reassessed. However, since there is no fundamental questioning of the expectations of reproduction as a social institution, it is only possible to re-evaluate France's monstrosity. The cases of Elise and France allow this chapter to function as a transition in my exploration of the monstrous. Firstly Elise, like Plectrude and Irène, remains monstrous "for all" in her context: these three characters are all human subjects rendered monstrous by various forms of social restriction, but their humanity is conveyed via textual representation. The case of France stands as a hinge, as she is not (directly) given a voice by the author

(contrary to previous cases of monstrous characters), and also as her monstrosity may be fundamentally reassessed.

This leads me to the final case of reassessment of monstrosity in Detambel's texts, where the author offers new writing/portrayals of characters deemed monstrous by society. Contrary to *A ton image*, the suggestion to re-think visions of monstrosity is not presented as a potential choice to the reader but rather this process unfolds over the course of the three novels I explored in Chapter 5. Detambel's portrayal of monstrous characters very visibly follows the double approach that I identified above. Indeed, she offers an open exposition of the disciplinary functioning of a retirement home and in which aged characters are made monstrous and victims of society's corporeal expectations and bodily abilities. Further than a demonstration of limiting processes of labelling of otherness and difference, in her writing Detambel allows the monster to evolve and to become a prism which projects multiple shapes and reflects multiple aspects of human corporeal identities. With the escape of her aged character, she dismantles widespread conceptions of old age as solely physical diminishing and disappearance (into monstrosity). Instead, the reader is taken along a textual journey of reconsideration of bodily difference. Moreover, as the aged character escapes the home and sure death as a monstrous character, the reflection on other possibilities of human corporeal identities is a reflection of human life. The reassessment of Taine's monstrosity saves his life (contrary to France) and arguably the life of others since he does not commit a murder or end up in a custodial establishment: this clearly demonstrates how these texts open new avenues for being in the body and human subjectivity, and for being with others in society. *Noces de chêne* ends on an opening and may appear unfinished – I argued that this is Detambel's own devised method to invite the creation of other stories for these aged subjects, and to rethink our notions of bodily difference when it touches old age and indeed all periods in the human lifecycle. The openness and unfinished aspects at the end of the text may also be said to represent an empty space for writers – Detambel and others – to re-explore through textual representation society's constricting limits and demands on subjects.

6.3 Monstrosity: new voice and future openings

In their own unique ways, all the texts studied in this thesis have offered re-interpretations of issues of bodily changes and corporeal difference, conveyed via a double approach to the monstrous. In each of these four re-inventions of the monstrous,

their authors have explored monstrosity from the point of view of society, how society imposes restrictions to subjects that are registered upon the body and controlled in disciplinary institutions. Whilst highlighting the limitations caused by this system, monstrosity also functions in these texts as a creative approach that seeks to analyse the subject alienated from his/her social context and from his/her own (unrecognised) body. With this double approach, the authors of my corpus have given a new voice to monstrosity in their texts. Monsters usually sit on the margins of stories and societies but in their stories they take centre stage, and whilst monsters are normally banished from society and silenced, these authors grant these monsters different forms of expression, through various instances of textual representation and multiple narrative voices. The title of Shildrick's book on which I drew extensively in my study translates an interest in the physicality of monsters; whilst Shildrick explored ways of 'embodying the monster', it could be said that the authors in this thesis undertook the literary endeavour of voicing monstrosity differently.

These new portrayals of monstrosity therefore required a new critical approach to the monstrous. My reading has combined close textual analysis with psychoanalytic theory, whilst locating these texts in a specific socio-cultural context. This devised method has set my study apart from other readings of contemporary French women's writing, as well as other critics of monstrosity. In his exploration of monstrosity as product of culture, Cohen writes that 'the monster exists only to be read'.⁴⁴⁴ In the light of the analyses I have undertaken, I posit that monstrosity functions best when "reading" is envisaged in the plural. Nobécourt's writing explores the failure of any attempt to inscribe the monstrous in a logical narrative, either when it is integrated into a linear storyline, or when it is reduced to a cause without acknowledging that it may simply be part of the complexities of human identity. The limits to (and immutability of) the monstrous necessarily imposed by textual representation may be compensated via other literary "openings", that is rereadings and rewritings of these textual monsters. In her study, Curti writes about the creation of hybrid shapes and monstrous characters as literature's 'overcoming of dichotomies'.⁴⁴⁵ The notion of an 'overcoming' of dichotomies remains problematic and does not feature in the texts I have explored. My analysis here suggests that the representation and reading of monstrosity in

⁴⁴⁴ Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 4.

⁴⁴⁵ Curti, p. 29.

contemporary French women's writing does not involve overcoming dichotomies, but rather opening these up through the double reading traced here.

This double approach to the monstrous has allowed authors to think creatively about new ways to convey contemporary anxieties around bodily changes and corporeal difference, and how these affect people's relations with each other and their place in society. This devised mode of reading these monstrous characters has proved an appropriate method of exploring typical physical and psychological transformations during the human lifecycle. Moreover, this productive critical approach to the monstrous can be utilised to explore other instances of monstrous subjects in literature. Other than the natural transformations of the human subject, other triggers to monstrosity may be identified in for instance the opening of geographical borders, France's position amongst an expanding Europe and fast-changing world, or in patterns of migration and new configurations of home and elsewhere. Whatever their origins and whatever their shapes, these monsters who may "creep in" more texts by women writers might sit between concepts of home and abroad, or us and them, but they are more productively comprehended as an expression of humanity.

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