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**Redefining the Self:  
Life Writing, Fairy Tale and Fantasy Fiction in  
Amélie Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes*.**

Amanda Ann Thomas

A thesis submitted for the  
degree of Master of Arts by Research

Durham University

School of Modern Languages and Cultures:  
Department of French

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## Introduction

The topic of this thesis stems from a fascination that I have had for Amélie Nothomb's novels since being introduced to her work as a teenager: I was mesmerized by Nothomb's hyperbolic descriptions of beauty and beastliness and her ability to transform her world through the act of writing into a fairy tale, recounting episodes of her life using monstrous characters and starkly contrasted images of beauty. Each episode of Nothomb's life is described in a separate autobiographical tale and serves as a jigsaw piece that the reader can use to construct an image of Nothomb's identity. During the early stages of my research, I had intended to compare *Métaphysique des tubes*,<sup>1</sup> an 'écriture de soi'<sup>2</sup> which particularly draws from fairy tale and fantasy fiction in order to express and refashion the author's own identity, with both Nothomb's *Le Sabotage amoureux*<sup>3</sup> and *Biographie de la faim*.<sup>4</sup> This is because the two texts form additional autobiographical representations of Nothomb's childhood and adolescence. However it quickly became apparent that comparing three Nothombian texts fully to several literary genres, and to fairy tales and fantasy fictions integral to these, would be an objective only successfully achievable in a lengthier thesis, and this is how I reached my decision to focus on one of Nothomb's works rather than turning my attention to further texts, thereby achieving only a superficial analysis of all three.

Although each autobiographical novel contains elements of fantasy, I have chosen to focus my analysis primarily on *Métaphysique des tubes*, because in describing the earliest period of her life, the reader witnesses the formation of

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<sup>1</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Métaphysique des tubes*, 13th edn (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2000; Livre de poche, 2009): all subsequent references to the text will appear as *MT* followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Signes de vie: Le pacte autobiographique 2* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), p. 26: This reference connects the term 'écriture de soi' with autobiographical models of writing to be discussed in chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Le Sabotage amoureux*, 21st edn (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1993; Livre de poche, 2009): all subsequent references to the text will appear as *SA* followed by the page number.

<sup>4</sup> ——— *Biographie de la faim*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2004; Livre de poche, 2006): all subsequent references to the text will appear as *BF* followed by the page number.

Nothomb's identity and this provides clues to begin to unlock the importance behind the status of beauty and idealisation of childhood that resonates in Nothomb's other autobiographical works. Furthermore, it is during Nothomb's earliest childhood, recounted in *Métaphysique des tubes*, that the literary genres of fairy tale and fantasy fiction, to be studied throughout this thesis, also become apparent both in content and literary construction of Nothomb's text: I wanted to analyse possible reasons why Nothomb writes using references to and stylistic devices of fairy tale and fantasy fiction, the relevance this has to childhood and the impact this has on the reader and on the believability of her text. Furthermore, I wanted to discover whether Nothomb's use of several literary genres and movements in her text in fact mirrors her fractured sense of Self before allowing her to reconstruct it.

There is, however, one literary genre that I have deliberately chosen to analyse only briefly and at certain points in this study; that of humour and comedy, often associated with Amélie Nothomb and her writing style. I came to this decision not because I believe the theme to be superfluous, but because I believe that condensing a vast and varied comic dimension into a thesis which concentrates first and foremost on the rewriting of fairy tale and fantasy fiction, analysing how Nothomb reworks images and stylistic devices integral to these, could not do the theme of comedy justice. Furthermore, analysing the value of comedy in Nothomb's work would create further topics and arguments which, while perhaps bringing greater richness to this thesis, would also only be manageable in a lengthier comparative study. Given this, I decided to analyse certain values of comedy in passing, attempting to hint at the importance of dark humour, comedy and pastiche, as opposed to studying it in greater depth in a separate chapter.

The first chapter analyses how readers and scholars react to and attempt to classify Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes* in addition to her other autobiographical texts, which are considered where appropriate. The intentional ambiguity found in the novel's presentation and form has lead several critics to

ask the question, is the text really an autobiography? If not, what is it? The contradictory opinions held by critics vary from autobiography to fiction, leading me to examine the definition of and boundaries between autobiography, the autobiographical novel, 'autofiction', and the autobiographical fairy tale as well as analyse the ways in which *Métaphysique des tubes* does or does not assimilate each genre. I then consider the definitions of fairy tale and fantasy fiction in order to introduce the genres and begin to illustrate the blurring that takes place in Nothomb's novel between 'écriture de soi' and fairy tale and fantasy fiction before echoes are more explicitly formed between *Métaphysique des tubes* and *La Belle et la Bête*<sup>5</sup> and *Peter Pan*<sup>6</sup> in the second and third chapters respectively.

The second chapter specifically examines the widespread themes of beauty and beastliness and the status of Beaumont's version of *La Belle et la Bête* in *Métaphysique des tubes*. The chapter begins by focusing on the role that the fairy tale fulfils for not only the child, but also the adult reader by referencing first and foremost both Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* and Phillips's *The Beast in the Nursery*. The chapter intends to show that, by echoing the fairy tale, considered since the early eighteenth century as a children's genre par excellence,<sup>7</sup> and fantasy literature, which arguably 'grows out of the fairy tale',<sup>8</sup> Nothomb cleverly turns to children's literature to describe her own childhood and to access her childhood memories with greater ease. I will then study the echoes between Nothomb's autobiographical novel and Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête*, emphasising the symbolism of water, the vital role of Beauty, the presentation of the Beast in all its guised forms, paying particular attention to the status and symbolism of Nothomb's monstrous carps, which introduces the

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<sup>5</sup> Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, *La Belle et la Bête et autres contes* (first publ. London: the author in *Le Magasin des Enfants, ou dialogues entre une sage Gouvernante et plusieurs de ses Élèves de la première Distinction [sic]*, 1756; Paris: Flammarion, 1999; repr. 2007): all subsequent references to the text will appear as *BB* followed by the page number.

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911; Puffin Classics, 2008): all subsequent references to the text will appear as *PP* followed by the page number.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Zipes, 'The Origins of the Fairy Tale for Children or, How Script Was Used to Tame the Beast in Us', in *Children and Their Books*, ed. by Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 119-34 (p. 131).

<sup>8</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, 'Fantasy Literature and the Fairy Tale', in *The Oxford Companion*, ed. by Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 150-54 (p. 151).



recurrent theme of gender. My study aims to show how Nothomb splinters the traditional images seen in Beaumont's tale to reconstruct them, creating an abundance of dualities that blur aspects of Nothomb's identity, namely to reflect her perception of her unstable image of gender and nationality.

The third chapter of this thesis endeavours to show the similarities between *Métaphysique des tubes* and Barrie's *Peter Pan*, and by doing so emphasise the negative aspects of childhood and the dangers associated with overstaying it. Connections between *Peter Pan* and Nothomb's novel may not be automatically made, but echoes that I have noticed in the text have lead me to consider whether Barrie's novel may have greater significance to Nothomb's writing. In a letter I sent to the author, I asked whether she saw similarities between Neverland and her childhood, to which she replied, 'il y a du vrai dans cette comparaison!'<sup>9</sup> She added that while she did not actively re-write *Peter Pan* into *Métaphysique des tubes*, the fantasy tale was important during her childhood: '[j]'ai lu *Peter Pan* quand j'étais petite, et il fait partie de mon inconscient. Donc, j'ai sans doute été influencée quand même. J'adore l'histoire de *Peter Pan*: elle parle d'une obsession qui ne m'a jamais quittée.'<sup>10</sup> In contemplating the use of fantasy fiction for children and adults, echoes are seen between the role of fantasy fiction and the fairy tale, which strengthen the theory that Nothomb uses elements of both genres not only because they are inherent to her childhood, but also because they serve various other purposes in her writing. I will propose similarities between Nothomb's and Barrie's motives for writing their tales, which may begin to clarify why both the themes of both tales echo one another. I will then look at the role of adventure and the idealisation of childhood, before comparing structural similarities that provoke the demise of the image of the perfect eternal childhood. The descent of the previously glorified age of childhood into darkness causes both Nothomb as protagonist and the children of Barrie's Neverland to seek alternative ways to retain happiness, and this is found in the central role of literature for characters

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<sup>9</sup> Amélie Nothomb, private correspondence with Amanda Thomas (Paris, 24.10.2011), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

of both books. Finally I will examine how gender confusion occurs in a different way than in the second chapter, and is apparent, instead of integrally to the content, in the relationship between the author and his or her protagonist.

In my conclusion I aim to draw all these aforementioned theories together by firstly suggesting two final literary categories that Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes* may successfully fit into: these will be postmodernism and feminism. I will examine how Nothomb uses elements of postmodernism to de- and reconstruct traditional fairy tales and comment through these on the ideals of beauty and the female form. A comparison of Nothomb's tales to those of Angela Carter's will also be undertaken to support the notion of Nothomb as a postmodernist writer. I will then relate themes stated in the topic of postmodernism to feminism, and examine the status of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa in Nothomb's autofictional and autobiographical novels. By attempting to assimilate Nothomb's writing to various genres I hope to show that doing so merely reduces the complexity of her work. I will refer to the theories that Riffaterre illustrates in *Text Production*, analysing the importance of the role of the reader and the place that ambiguity occupies in a text. Nothomb's writing style incorporates elements of all the genres and movements that this study examines. Her work is rich and varied and it is precisely through the ambiguous nature of her novels that they acquire multiple interpretations by various scholars. Nothomb defies generic classification, and creates her own Nothombian literary recipe for success.

## Chapter 1:

### Life as literature, literature as life: critical contexts and literary genres

A quick glance at the 2009 Livre de poche edition of *Métaphysique des tubes* begins to explain why scholars are failing to reach a shared conclusion regarding the book's most fitting classification. An autobiographical reading of the book is encouraged in part by the front cover, as it is consumed entirely by a close-up photograph of a young girl which comes from the author's own collection,<sup>11</sup> and indeed turns out to be Nothomb as a child.<sup>12</sup> This could be interpreted as connecting the author with the protagonist by implying that the young girl in the story is Amélie Nothomb as a child, a link which is a key component to Lejeune's autobiographical pact,<sup>13</sup> as we shall imminently discover. The final part of the blurb on the back cover of *Métaphysique des tubes* also supports an autobiographical reading of the book:

Avec cette 'autobiographie de zéro à trois ans', Amélie Nothomb nous révèle des aspects ignorés de sa personnalité et de la vie en général, tout en se montrant plus incisive, plus lucide et plus drôle que jamais (MT back cover).

The image of Amélie on the front cover, combined with the quote (of undisclosed origin) describing *Métaphysique des tubes* as an autobiography of her early childhood, gives the reader an expectation that the book will be exactly that. Yet, as we will see in the study below, not all variations of the genre's definition will allow for Nothomb's book to be thought of as an autobiography. In fact I emphasise that the quote on the back cover is of undisclosed origin as some scholars, like Lejeune, believe that one of the conditions that needs to be fulfilled in order for a text to be an autobiography is that the content should be

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<sup>11</sup> 'Couverture : collection photographie, de l'auteur' (MT back cover)

<sup>12</sup> Laureline Amanieux, *Amélie Nothomb, L'éternelle affamée* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2005), insert found between pp. 192-3: Two photographs of the author dated 1970 are featured in a collection of photographs found in Amanieux's book, showing a young girl looking remarkably similar to the Amélie on the cover of *Métaphysique des tubes*.

<sup>13</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France*, 2nd edn (Paris: Armand Colin, 1998), p. 17.

verifiable.<sup>14</sup> here Nothomb's book is described as an autobiography by a quote which does not have a source and could in theory itself be fiction. To complicate matters further, the declaration of 'roman' as sub-heading on the title page for *Métaphysique des tubes* could lead readers alternatively to consider it as purely fictional. The genre that Nothomb's book indicates itself to be on the title page clearly differs from the genre suggested on back cover of the book: this discord between autobiography and fiction continues to resonate throughout *Métaphysique des tubes* as it does Nothomb's other autobiographically based books. In the second and third chapter of this thesis the instability in genre of Nothomb's works will prove to be an important technique as she reflects her unstable sense of self onto her texts.

From this very brief interpretation of the book's presentation, and from the research I have carried out concerning Nothomb and her work, I have decided to investigate the differences and similarities between three potential classifications, before introducing a fourth possibility, the autobiographical fairy tale, which can be discussed only after the preliminary three: these are autobiography, autofiction and the autobiographical novel. There is a substantial quantity of nuanced critical studies which consider the boundary between autobiography and fiction and where it should lie. Consequently I have decided to focus on a limited selection of key specialist theories in this chapter to allow for a more in-depth study of certain scholarly notions. As such, I will primarily be focusing on the ideas of Philippe Lejeune and Linda Anderson in the study of autobiography. For autofiction and the autobiographical novel, the foundations for my analysis will centre on, although not be exclusive to, the work of both Philippe Gasparini and Vincent Colonna.

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<sup>14</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Signes de vie : Le pacte autobiographique 2* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), p. 31: 'un texte autobiographique peut être légitimement vérifié (même si c'est dans la pratique très difficile) par une enquête'.

## Exploring genres: autobiography, 'autofiction' and the autobiographical novel

Given the presentation of *Métaphysique des tubes* noted above, it would be understandable if someone were to consider the novel in question to be an autobiography. Indeed, Lambert-Perreault writes in her master's thesis 'à l'instar de mes collègues, j'estime que le terme "autobiographie" constitue l'étiquette générique la plus apte à qualifier les récits susnommés'<sup>15</sup> when considering several of Nothomb's autobiographical works including *Métaphysique des tubes*. She comes to this conclusion based on two main ideas: firstly from a conversation between the author and Eric Neuhoﬀ in which *Biographie de la faim* is discussed - the only autobiographical work not to be labelled 'roman'. Quoting Nothomb from the interview 'Amélie Nothomb: Cette fois, tout est vrai' in *Madame Figaro* dated the 4th of September 2004, Lambert-Perreault highlights the author's attitude to Lejeune's autobiographical pact:

C'est la première fois que le pacte autobiographique est atteint à 100 %. On a peur de l'autobiographie aussi longtemps qu'on croit être obligé de dire toute la vérité. Cette fois j'ai compris qu'on n'est pas forcé de dire toute la vérité, surtout pas. Mais par contre, tout est vrai.<sup>16</sup>

Nothomb specifically states above that, based on her judgement, the autobiographical pact is completely fulfilled solely within *Biographie de la faim*. However Lambert-Perreault's thesis reassesses Nothomb's other autobiographical works and concludes that the author's voiced unease towards the autobiographical genre has previously prevented her from applying 'autobiography' to her novels. While I agree with Lambert-Perreault that 'la critique journalistique et universitaire n'a jamais discuté l'authenticité des faits décrits',<sup>17</sup> I would suggest that Nothomb's writing style, her use of excessive language and childlike exaggeration, all points to which I shall later return,

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<sup>15</sup> Marie-Christine Lambert-Perreault, 'La mélancolie comme structure infralangagière de l'œuvre d'Amélie Nothomb' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Quebec at Montreal, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

means that while nobody would suggest that Nothomb is lying about her past, she may be altering and embellishing it in order to obtain various effects: it could perhaps be for this very reason that Nothomb states indirectly in the quote seen above that the autobiographical pact is not fully met in her other autobiographical novels. Secondly, Lambert-Perreault's decision to describe Nothomb's texts as autobiographies is reached by consideration of the autobiographical pact based on Lejeune's earliest model found in *L'autobiographie en France*:<sup>18</sup> she therefore does not consider the impact that the subtle alteration which Lejeune made to the pact in 1975,<sup>19</sup> which is explained fully in due course, has on Nothomb's autobiographical novels. Due to these reasons, calling *Métaphysique des tubes* an autobiography may not be the most fitting choice, and to decide this it will be important to refer to Lejeune's texts to clarify the genre of autobiography. An understanding of an alternative view on autobiography founded on psychoanalysis may explain how Lambert-Perreault comes to her chosen conclusion, and this will be analysed in due course. Firstly, however, it would be useful to briefly contemplate autobiography's historical context.

According to Linda Anderson the term 'autobiography' may have been first used by William Taylor in a review of Isaac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies* at the end of the eighteenth century. It was written as a 'pedantic' suggested replacement for the 'hybrid' term 'self-biography', employed by D'Israeli.<sup>20</sup> Taylor's alteration of D'Israeli's 'self-biography' to 'autobiography' shows that even at the beginning of its employment, autobiography was a term that was attempting to tame a rebellious category of texts. The criteria that would need to be met in order for a text to be considered an autobiography as opposed to an autobiographically inspired fiction<sup>21</sup> started to become increasingly specific. This was to reduce the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> I use 'autobiographically inspired fictions' as an umbrella-term to refer to not only fictions either loosely or closely inspired by an author's own life (autofictions or autobiographical novels

ease with which the term ‘autobiography’ could otherwise ‘spread endlessly and get everywhere, undermining the objective stance of the critic’.<sup>22</sup> Yet despite an attempt to classify the genre from the onset, it would appear that academics and critics have still not succeeded in securing a common and shared opinion on what defines autobiography. Moreover, while Taylor’s suggestion of the term ‘autobiography’ was partly made to narrow the quantity of texts that could be considered as an autobiography at the end of the eighteenth century, the contemporary notion of an autobiography would appear to have once again become more fluid: many academics, through later revisions of their work, have nuanced their initial definitions of autobiography: where at first these varying definitions had rigid boundaries, now the boundary between what is considered autobiography and fiction has become more ambiguous, allowing the author greater flexibility with regards to the accurateness and believability of their account: we can witness the evolution of the genre’s definition in Lejeune’s self-reflective commentary found in *Signes de vie*:<sup>23</sup> he comments that autobiography is ‘un de ces mots bizarres, autour desquels on se bat à coup de concepts, en coupant des cheveux en quatre. [...] Ses frontières sont si poreuses! Il y a tant de degrés intermédiaires entre elle [autobiography] et la biographie, entre elle et la fiction, et si peu d’autobiographies “pures”’.<sup>24</sup>

I have chosen to look at two fundamentally different views on autobiography, which have both over time evolved and become increasingly overlapping, before analysing each definition’s impact on the categorisation of *Métaphysique des tubes*. The first notion of autobiography which I am going to consider belongs to Linda Anderson, who turns towards psychoanalysis in her search to understand what she believes is meant by the term ‘autobiography’.

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respectively), as well as a variety of other life-writing subgenres which are autobiographical in character but are not autobiographies.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Signes de vie : Le pacte autobiographique 2*, p. 16: ‘[e]n relisant mon premier livre, j’ai été frappé [...] par le fait que je n’avais jamais vu toutes les implications de ma “découverte”. J’étais jeune, j’avais du temps devant moi.’

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

Two central elements on which Anderson dwells and I wish to focus are firstly the work that Sigmund Freud devoted to the unconscious and secondly Lacan's 'Mirror Stage'.<sup>25</sup> My choice to focus on this part of Anderson's analysis stems from Nothomb's own understanding of autobiography,<sup>26</sup> which may have been formed partially from the theories of both psychoanalysts.

The Freudian notion in question is the past's ability to alter the present. In her book *Sigmund Freud*, Pamela Thurschwell writes that 'childhood wishes and memories live on in unconscious life, even if they have been erased from consciousness'.<sup>27</sup> This erasure may be due to repression, where an individual pushes back a desire or memory to the depths of his unconscious because of its either unattainable or threatening quality. Yet Freud suggests that in certain circumstances such as a 'repetition or intrusive memory' what is repressed may be retrieved from this 'unconscious life'.<sup>28</sup> It could be inferred from this that the way in which past memories and emotions re-enter the individual's present calls for the adult to constantly reconsider what was previously known as past, making it an unstable and fragmented structure, which is constantly shifting and reforming. Indeed, Anderson herself concludes that an individual repeatedly forms different views on past and present events or emotions as further memories are drawn from the unconscious: thus 'History', Anderson states, 'is never definitive or finally known'.<sup>29</sup> If this is so then the traditional view of autobiography, where the author's image portrayed must be accurate and truthful, is nigh on impossible. Thus we can understand how Anderson sees the theory as having 'important consequences for the understanding of autobiography and how we remember our lives'.<sup>30</sup>

Although Anderson does not directly mention any further Freudian notion, I would briefly like to investigate Freud's understanding of fantasy and

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<sup>25</sup> Lionel Bailly, *Lacan* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> 'La mélancolie comme structure infralangagière de l'œuvre d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Pamela Thurschwell, *Sigmund Freud* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-2.



dreams, because as we shall see, both are highly relevant to Nothomb's stance on autobiography. According to Freud, a fantasy can reveal itself both consciously, for example as a daydream or acknowledged desire, and unconsciously as a dream or primal fantasy.<sup>31</sup> 'This concept', Thurschwell writes, 'involves an imaginary scene in which the subject who is fantasising is usually the protagonist'<sup>32</sup> in which a wish is fulfilled in a distorted way. Anthony Storr states that to Freud 'dreams were disguised, hallucinatory fulfilments of repressed wishes' and were treated as if they were neurotic symptoms.<sup>33</sup> These dreams could represent wishes repressed from any time in an individual's life and be triggered or transformed by past and present memories which enter into the individual's dream.<sup>34</sup> Taking these points into consideration as far as autobiography is concerned, it would appear irrelevant whether a specific memory portrayed by an author is fact or fantasy, as the latter is merely a disguised or subconscious (non-verifiable) truth, repressed from both childhood and the present alike. Likewise, a dream is very often a mixture of an individual's memory and the fantasies that those memories provoke, making it possible to believe that dreams are equally as important to an individual's identity as the acts they carry out while awake. It would seem that Nothomb asks her readers to accept a similar understanding of autobiography when she compares fantasy and reality in *Métaphysique des tubes*. Quoting Nothomb from an interview, Ferenc Tóth writes:

J'ai pris parti que le fantasme fait partie de la réalité, ce qui est vrai car nos fantasmes font partie de notre vie. [...] on ne sait pas forcément ce qui est fantasme et ce qui est réalité dans ce livre – tout ce que je sais c'est que j'ai tout vécu.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Storr, *Freud*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ferenc Tóth, *Le Japon et l'œuvre romanesque d'Amélie Nothomb* (Saarbrücken: Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2010), p. 64.

Nothomb places little importance on distinguishing between which events occurred in her imagination and which in reality, believing that either way each memory forms part of her identity.

Anderson moves on to contemplate the impact of Lacan's 'Mirror Stage' on the traditional perception of autobiography, explaining the term as the period in which an individual fastens together his or her identity based on the image received as a reflection from the Other. Here Lacan's term 'the Other' signifies both the 'otherness' of the individual's own unconscious as well as the 'otherness' of people and social order surrounding him. Lionel Bailly simplifies the notion in his book *Lacan*,<sup>36</sup> understanding it as 'the first time the child thinks of itself as 'I' in relationship to an image that it starts to understand as representing itself' which 'leads to the formation of the ego and the perception of the Subject'.<sup>37</sup> Briefly explained, the ego acts as a go-between to the id, understood to be a childlike yearning for basic needs and feelings, and the super-ego, which embodies moralistic values learned from parents and society. In this way the ego forms the part of personality that is most outwardly visible in a healthy adult. It is the combination of the ego and the subject's perception in the 'Mirror Stage' that arguably impacts the greatest on Anderson's understanding of autobiography: Bailly explains a formed identity as a combination of '*what I am*' and '*what others see of me*'.<sup>38</sup> Consequently we are asked by Lacan to understand an identity as a sort of mosaic image, the merging of a multitude of separate ideas perceived both internally from the individual and externally from the Other, leading to a single image which, as Anderson put it, 'the subject fantasizes as real'.<sup>39</sup> If the mirror is traditionally used as a metaphor or simile for autobiography for its self-reflective qualities, then, as Anderson emphasises, Lacan's 'Mirror Stage' theory could alter the definition of autobiography. She argues that the image produced by an author in his or her writings can only ever

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<sup>36</sup> Lionel Bailly, *Lacan* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 65.

be fictional as the author is never who he thinks he is, with his ego protecting him against what Bailly describes as 'the threat of incoherence and impotence', providing 'a fictitious coherence'.<sup>40</sup> The importance that Anderson places on Freud and Lacan would suggest that she sees 'pure'<sup>41</sup> autobiography as impossible, indirectly calling for the reader to rethink what should be meant by the genre. The result would be a definition which allowed an autobiography to mix fantasy with reality and be distorted by perceptions from the other (unconscious) and the Other (law, morals and society).

It is unlikely that this definition would have been shared by Philippe Lejeune at the beginning of his career, although it is crucial to emphasise that his current definition of the autobiographical pact has been revised several times, and with each revision he has widened and relaxed the criteria that he believes should be met by a text in order for it to be considered an autobiography. In fact it was Lejeune who stated after revising his theories that 'pure' autobiographies rarely exist,<sup>42</sup> which shows the extent to which his ideas, as well as the genre itself, have altered over time. The evolution in Lejeune's definition of the genre is interesting and his subtle alterations merit analysis as they bear importance when deciding if Nothomb's texts could and should be considered as autobiographies or instead as autobiographical novels. In order to understand the progression that Lejeune's autobiographical pact has made, I have decided to begin by stating his original and then slightly modified definition. Firstly then, according to his work in *L'autobiographie en France*, first published in 1971: '*Définition : nous appelons autobiographie le récit rétrospectif en prose que quelqu'un fait de sa propre existence, quand il met l'accent principal sur sa vie*

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<sup>40</sup> Lacan, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> *Signes de vie*, p. 63: '[i]l y a [...] si peu d'autobiographies "pures"'. 'Pure' autobiography as a term in relation to Lejeune's self-reflective revisions of the autobiographical pact, which comment on his self-declared naïve initial mission in *L'autobiographie en France* to find one conclusive, and thus less flexible, definition of an autobiography (see fn. 12, p. 4). Thus 'pure' autobiography in the Lejeunian sense would suggest a total and unwavering truth, not taking into account the elements of the subconscious, and their ability to influence and alter the author's believed true identity, studied above in relation to Anderson.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

*individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.*'<sup>43</sup> In *Le pacte autobiographique*, published four years later, the definition of autobiography given by Lejeune is 'légèrement modifiée'<sup>44</sup> to the first. A comparison of the two suggests he encountered various challenges since starting his research which caused him to reconsider his initial thoughts: '*Définition: Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.*'<sup>45</sup> The subtle change noted by Lejeune appears in the alteration from 'quelqu'un' that is chosen for the initial definition to 'une personne réelle' in the latter. This supports his bold statement that 'une identité est, ou n'est pas'<sup>46</sup> and clarifies that a core element when classifying a work as an autobiography (as opposed to autobiographical, which we will discuss later) is the unity between author, character and narrator.

The subtleness of the change in definition is accompanied by an additional element that must be fulfilled by an autobiography according to Lejeune. The first two requirements remain unaltered: an autobiography must follow a certain linguistic structure – being a 'récit [...] en prose' and discuss the individual life and formation of character of the author. The change comes in the separation of what in *L'autobiographie en France* forms one element: 'La situation de l'auteur', composed of part a; 'identité de l'auteur, du narrateur et du personnage' and part b; 'perspective rétrospective du récit'.<sup>47</sup> In the updated definition it becomes:

3. *Situation de l'auteur* : identité de l'auteur (dont le nom renvoie à une personne réelle) et du narrateur.

4. *Position du narrateur* :

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<sup>43</sup> *L'autobiographie en France*, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Le pacte autobiographique*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 15. It should be noted that Lejeune tempers this statement further still and in *Signes de vie*, p. 25, writes the following: 'dans le *Pacte*, j'explique froidement que l'identité est ou n'est pas' before noting that more ambiguities and transitions also exist, but for the purposes of clear-cut basic classification opts to keep his bold statement.

<sup>47</sup> *L'autobiographie en France*, p. 10.

- a) identité du narrateur et du personnage principal,
- b) perspective rétrospective du récit.<sup>48</sup>

Here we can notice a split in the triangular unity given to the classification of autobiography, where author = narrator = character. Paradoxically, however, this alteration doesn't diminish the importance of the unity in Lejeune's autobiographical pact, but strengthens it: by providing two steps (i.e. author = narrator and narrator = character) instead of one, I would argue that the unity of identity finally can become total and truthful. This is because Lejeune's former approach did not specify that the author must be a real person, and as such allowed for a blurring to occur between author and character through an author's intentional and manipulative fabrications about his or her identity. The reason that I am emphasising the importance of the variation in definition is because it would seem that the majority of the confusion surrounding the classification of Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes* comes from exactly this blur: the first uncertainty to the 'total and truthful' unity between author, narrator and protagonist needed by the revised autobiographical pact is found in the author's name, Amélie Nothomb, and the second lies in the significance in having an unnamed protagonist: both are curiously intertwined, as will become clear below.

As mentioned above, the first lapse in the fulfilment of the pact is created by the author's name. Lejeune writes in *Le pacte autobiographique* that by 'une personne réelle' he means 'une personne dont l'existence est attestée par l'état civil et vérifiable'.<sup>49</sup> Nothomb's first name is not Amélie, it is Fabienne.<sup>50</sup> when questioned about her name by Mark Lee, Nothomb avoids stating her actual name, but confirms that it is not Amélie: 'pas d'Amélie dans la famille. Mais ça ne m'a pas empêché de m'appeler Amélie. Simplement, ce n'est pas sur ma carte

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<sup>48</sup> *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Lee, 'The Third Sex: Amélie Nothomb, garçon manqué', *A Decade of Women's Writing in France: Trends and Horizons 2000-2010 IGRS Conference* (14-16 October, 2010)

d'identité.<sup>51</sup> However it is not this reason alone that means that *Métaphysique des tubes* should not be considered an autobiography, it is instead the impact that this incongruity has on her novels. Concerning this topic, Amanieux makes an interesting argument which should not be ignored: despite the fact that Nothomb chooses to use Amélie in both her private and professional life does not mean that she cannot manipulate her audience by using it in her books: 'son emploi dans la fiction', Amanieux writes, 'maintient un écart entre identité du personnage et identité réelle de la romancière'.<sup>52</sup> Nothomb's use of a name which is not legally attached to her means that she has the ability to play with the truth as she so desires.

Moreover, in 'The Third Sex: Amélie Nothomb, garçon manqué', Mark Lee highlights Nothomb's penchant for onomastics and her tendency to assign names to her characters which are full of hidden meaning and personal significance.<sup>53</sup> He states that one of Nothomb's recurrent themes, gender confusion, can be more thoroughly understood through this penchant, as the occasions whereby Nothomb changes a character's name mid-story to one of opposite gender are particularly revealing of her own past.<sup>54</sup> Lee also specifically states that onomastic and gender confusion is especially significant in *Métaphysique des tubes*, and we shall return to this point in his paper in the second chapter of this thesis. The general points of his paper support Amanieux's notion that Nothomb can manipulate her audience by the use of names, or exclusion of her own name in her stories, and this clarifies in part why, when considering the autobiographical pact in relation to Nothomb, the reader should pay special attention. This is further reinforced by the fact that Nothomb

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<sup>51</sup> Mark D. Lee, 'Entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', *The French Review*, 77 (February 2004), 562-75 (p. 574).

<sup>52</sup> Laureline Amanieux, *Le récit siamois* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2009), pp. 213-4.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Third Sex: Amélie Nothomb, garçon manqué'

<sup>54</sup> Ibid: Quoting Lee: '[i]t appears there was a significant gender confusion at Nothomb's birth, but opposite to the version related in *Le fait du prince*. So convinced were Nothomb's parents of the sex of their third child that they had already given 'him' a clearly gendered name while still in the womb. And so, at birth, surprised, unprepared, and most likely disappointed, the parents had to 'débaptiser' their baby Jean-Baptiste...'

categorically refuses to utter her genuine name: when Lee asks her whether she would like to reveal it she replies '[n]on, parce que cela induirait en erreur'.<sup>55</sup> In fact, this matters more than her choice to use a different name as an author: Lejeune has no objections to pseudonyms, he merely defines that an explanation is required: 'écrivain son autobiographie', he writes, 'l'auteur à pseudonyme en donnera lui-même l'origine', which if done 'ne change rien à l'identité'.<sup>56</sup> But an explanation is impossible because, as Amanieux and Mark Lee observe, 'Amélie' is never actually attributed to the protagonist in *Métaphysique des tubes*. This breaks the rules of Lejeune's autobiographical pact once more as the relationship firstly between the author and narrator and secondly between the narrator and the protagonist cannot be trusted as wholly true.

Given that no connection is explicitly made by Nothomb between herself and the child protagonist in *Métaphysique des tubes*, it is intriguing that nobody refutes that Nothomb is the young girl: had another author written the novel we may have presumed the girl to be purely imaginary. It is perhaps Nothomb's extensive presence in the media that allows the reader to make this connection without it being clearly stated. Indeed, in his review of the book for *The French Review*, Lee writes that it is not necessary to highlight the autobiographical character of the work given that, due to her media identity, her public knows she bears the same historical past as the main character.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, when discussing the omission of the protagonist's first name, Lee mentions that many people are so convinced of the link that no omission is even acknowledged: '[i]l paraît que ces journalistes et critiques ont conclu à un de [sic] préceptes du pacte autobiographique sans que les faits du roman l'autorisent'.<sup>58</sup>

If we consider *Métaphysique des tubes* to be an autobiographical novel, a work of fiction based closely on her past, as opposed to an autobiography, then

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<sup>55</sup> 'Entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', p. 575.

<sup>56</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> Mark D. Lee, 'Review of *Métaphysique des tubes*', *The French Review*, 75 (April 2002), 1006-7 (p. 1007).

<sup>58</sup> Mark D. Lee, *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 118.

Susan Lanser would warn Nothomb's audience against readily making the link between author and protagonist. 'The cardinal rule for reading fiction is that the narrating "I" is not the author', she states, 'and thus the claims made by the narrating "I" are not to be taken for the author's claims'.<sup>59</sup> Her work also helps clarify why Nothomb's readers may form a connection between the author and the narrator in *Métaphysique des tubes* as Lanser states that the reader's temptation to relate the two is made stronger and easier when no name is given in the text to the protagonist. Furthermore, Lanser suggests that 'nonnarrativity',<sup>60</sup> writing thoughts as opposed to facts, facilitates the connection between author and protagonist: Nothomb's writing style may therefore influence the reader to presume her work is autobiographical, as her philosophical musings scatter themselves throughout the novel. This, alongside recurrent statements made by the author that everything in the book was 'vécu',<sup>61</sup> may explain how many critics have recounted episodes found in *Métaphysique des tubes* in biographical accounts of Nothomb's life, as previously highlighted by Lee. But as Philippe Lejeune expresses clearly: 'l'autobiographie, elle, ne comporte pas de degrés: c'est tout ou rien.'<sup>62</sup> Nothomb may write in a way to encourage links between herself and the protagonist and declare in interviews that everything written in certain novels is true; the fact remains that the book is labelled 'roman' and despite similarities between Nothomb's life and the protagonist's the autobiographical pact is not fully met.

Furthermore, there are various points in *Métaphysique des tubes* which make active efforts to deter the reader's trust: '[u]ne affirmation aussi énorme – "je me souviens de tout" – n'a aucune chance d'être crue par quiconque. Cela n'a pas d'importance. S'agissant d'un énoncé aussi invérifiable, je vois moins que jamais l'intérêt d'être crédible' (MT 35). If Lejeune writes in his *Signes de vie*

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<sup>59</sup> Susan S. Lanser, 'The "I" of the Beholder: Equivocal Attachments and the Limits of Structuralist Narratology', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 206-19 (p. 207).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> 'Le Japon et l'œuvre romanesque d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 64.

<sup>62</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 25.



definition that 'dans l'autobiographie, la relation avec l'auteur est *embrayée* (il vous demande de le croire, il voudrait obtenir votre estime [...])', <sup>63</sup> then Nothomb's indifferent attitude expressed above steps further away from autobiography. Later in the book Nothomb writes about a fabrication that she tries to pass off as truth to her sister, Juliette: the protagonist's new pet is 'un âne magique qui parle' (MT 114). Juliette does not believe her, asking '[p]ourquoi tu mens tout le temps?' (MT 114). The narrator's reaction here is markedly similar to the earlier statement: 'je n'étais pas crédible. Ce n'était pas grave. Au fond, cela m'était égal, qu'on me croie ou non. Je continuerais à inventer, pour mon plaisir. [...] Moi au moins, je croyais à ce que je me disais' (MT 115). This reinforces the idea that fantasy may be woven with reality in the book, as indicated by Nothomb in an earlier quotation. So is this book really an autobiography; or merely autobiographical?

#### 'Roman autobiographique' or 'autofiction'?

It has been established that at various points *Métaphysique des tubes* breaks away from the realms of autobiography and mixes autobiographical writing with fictional techniques. The decision to consider the novel as belonging more closely to fiction than to autobiography is further supported by Lejeune's 'pacte romanesque'. He writes that the pact is formed of two aspects: '*pratique patente de la non-identité*', whereby the author and the protagonist do not share the same name, and '*attestation de fictivité*', stating that 'c'est en général le sous-titre *roman* qui remplit cette fonction sur la couverture [...]'. <sup>64</sup> Both of these requirements are fulfilled by Nothomb in her writing of *Métaphysique des tubes*, while she still undisputedly deals with autobiographical elements. Thus we may be tempted to categorise the book as 'roman autobiographique' which forms part of this 'pacte romanesque', as indeed the majority of literary critics do. Lejeune understands 'le roman autobiographique' as:

<sup>63</sup> *Signes de vie : Le pacte autobiographique 2*, p. 32.

<sup>64</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 27.

Tous les textes de fiction dans lesquels le lecteur peut avoir des raisons de soupçonner, à partir des ressemblances qu'il croit deviner, qu'il y a identité de l'auteur et du *personnage*, alors que l'auteur, lui, a choisi de nier cette identité, ou du moins de ne pas l'affirmer.<sup>65</sup>

It would seem that the definition has the ability, although attributed to 'le pacte romanesque', to also belong to 'le pacte fantasmatique':<sup>66</sup> Lejeune describes this as an indirect form of the autobiographical pact with an 'écriture double' because the novel oscillates between the two established genres, novel and autobiography, while being 'ni l'un ni l'autre; à l'autobiographie, manqueront la complexité, l'ambiguïté, etc.; au roman, l'exactitude'.<sup>67</sup> 'Le pacte fantasmatique' stems from the belief that the novel provides a more genuine picture of reality than autobiography. Many authors share this opinion, including a good friend of Nothomb, Jacqueline Harpman: '[q]uant à la véracité des événements, elle n'a aucune importance [...] La vérité est ailleurs, dans le récit, les émotions.'<sup>68</sup> She goes so far as to call autobiography 'le genre le plus mensonger de tous puisqu'il prétend être vrai'.<sup>69</sup> Nothomb makes similar, more subtle and indirect statements concerning the genre: '[j]e pense que je me révèle avec beaucoup plus de véracité dans mes romans non-autobiographiques que dans mes romans autobiographiques, ce qui ne signifie pas nécessairement que je mens.'<sup>70</sup> This is because with her novels that appear purely fictive she can express whatever she is feeling without worrying that the reader will automatically connect her to the book's protagonist. 'Je ne fais pas tellement la différence entre les deux genres, roman autobiographique ou roman non-autobiographique',<sup>71</sup> she adds, the reasons for which are clarified in an interview carried out for *Bulletin Bpi* at the Centre Pompidou. 'Quand j'écris de façon directement autobiographique et

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 42

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Michel Zumkir, *Amélie Nothomb de A à Z* (Brussels: Le Grand Miroir, 2007), pp. 82-3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder, 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', in *Amélie Nothomb, Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 177-207 (p. 194).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

reconnaissable', Nothomb begins, 'je sais qu'il y a des parties de moi que je ne pourrai pas dire et qui resurgiront probablement dans les fictions'.<sup>72</sup> Nothomb's own definition of autobiography found in *Biographie de la faim* as she comments on a story she writes as a child is worth highlighting:

En effet, dans l'œuf géant, le jaune n'avait pas résisté au coup d'État des jeunes révolutionnaires. Il s'était répandu dans le blanc et cette apocalypse de lécithine avait provoqué l'explosion de la coquille. L'œuf s'était alors métamorphosé en une titanesque omelette spatiale qui évoluerait dans le vide cosmique jusqu'à la fin du temps.

Oui, ce devrait être ça, une autobiographie (BF 181).

These two quotes when studied in tandem could suggest that Nothomb's autobiographical novels should be considered as belonging to this indirect autobiographical pact, for which Lejeune concludes his description as follows: 'le lecteur est ainsi invité à lire les romans non seulement comme des *fictions* renvoyant à une vérité de la "nature humaine", mais aussi comme des *fantasmes* révélateurs d'un individu.'<sup>73</sup> Nothomb chooses the best of both worlds; by claiming autobiography in interviews, all the while labelling the book 'roman', she can inject as much truth as she likes without being controlled by it. After all, as Lejeune points out, '[i]l est impossible de dire qu'un romancier ment: cela n'a aucun sens, puisqu'il ne s'est pas engagé à vous dire la vérité.'<sup>74</sup>

Yet it is important to remember that Lejeune's initial definition of 'le roman autobiographique' becomes slightly blurred when comparing it to some contemporary counterparts. This could probably be explained by Serge Doubrovsky's attempt to challenge a subcategory of Lejeune's pact, which until then was a reported 'case aveugle'.<sup>75</sup> Lejeune created a table in an attempt to simplify how to decide whether a book was 'roman' or 'autobiographie'. The

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<sup>72</sup> Francine Figuière and Catherine Geoffroy, 'Écrire, écrire... pourquoi?', *Bulletin Bpi*, January-March 2009, pp. 7-9 (p. 8).

<sup>73</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> *Signes de vie*, p. 31.

<sup>75</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 31.

result depended firstly on whether the pact met was 'romanesque', 'Pacte = 0' or 'autobiographique' and secondly on whether the protagonist shared, may have shared or did not share the author's name.<sup>76</sup> From these combinations appeared two 'cases aveugles':

a) Le héros d'un roman déclaré tel, peut-il avoir le même nom que l'auteur? Rien n'empêcherait la chose d'exister, et c'est peut-être une contradiction interne dont on pourrait tirer des effets intéressants. Mais, dans la pratique, aucun exemple ne se présente à l'esprit d'une telle recherche.

[...]

b) Dans une autobiographie *déclarée*, le personnage peut-il avoir un nom différent de l'auteur (la question du pseudonyme mise à part)?<sup>77</sup>

Doubrovsky took to rectifying the absence of 'a'; the outcome of which was the publication of his book *Fils* in 1977. On the back of the book he created a neologism, 'autofiction', to serve as its genre's label, which was defined by the author as 'fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels',<sup>78</sup> while not being necessarily autobiographical in any way given it does not specify that the genuine events and facts mentioned must be those of the author in question. Later, in Lejeune's more recent publication *Signes de vie*, he mentions Doubrovsky's neologism in the following context when listing a series of borderline genres of autobiography: 'tous les mixtes de roman et d'autobiographie (zone large et confuse que le mot-valise "autofiction" inventé par Doubrovsky pour remplir une case vide d'un de mes tableaux, a fini par recouvrir)'.<sup>79</sup> This seems to imply that 'autofiction' can apply to any literary recipe possessing varying ratios of 'roman' to 'autobiographie', and so would seem to wipe out his previous definition of 'roman autobiographique'. Does this mean that the two terms are interchangeable? It certainly would simplify the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-2.

<sup>78</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Moi aussi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), p. 63

<sup>79</sup> *Signes de vie*, p. 25.

classification of Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes* if it could be considered as being both simultaneously. Yet critics are quick to obliterate this theory: the title of Gasparini's 2004 publication *Est-il je?: Roman autobiographique et autofiction*<sup>80</sup> is enough to highlight the division of the two terms.

Gasparini clarifies the difference between autofictions and autobiographical novels, and concerning the latter writes:

Le roman autobiographique va se définir par sa politique ambiguë d'identification du héros avec l'auteur : le texte suggère de les confondre, soutient la vraisemblance de ce parallèle, mais il distribue également des indices de fictionnalité.<sup>81</sup>

It would seem that the major difference between 'autofiction' and 'roman autobiographique', at least for Gasparini, is the need for greater ambiguity in the latter. Already suggested by his initial definition, he proceeds to add that 'le double mouvement d'aveu et de déni est constitutif du roman autobiographique'.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, by referring to his categorisation table, it can be understood that the onomastic 'author-narrator-protagonist' identity is optional for a 'roman autobiographique', with Gasparini adding that despite this it is 'souvent partielle, parfois complète'. He also states that whether 'identité' is 'contractuelle ou fictionnelle' should be 'ambiguë'.<sup>83</sup> In the same table 'autofiction' is also represented as having an optional onomastic 'author-narrator-protagonist' identity but as having a purely fictional created identity, meaning that the reader should hesitate less when deciding whether to believe the story being told than with a 'roman autobiographique' as it contains no ambiguity: while similarities will of course be found between the protagonist and the author, there should be an element of the protagonist's personality or appearance which ruptures the connection between author and protagonist and

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<sup>80</sup> Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il je?: Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

therefore eliminates any confusion concerning whether the novel is or is not an autobiography.

Gasparini's definition of 'autofiction' generally aligns with Gérard Genette's interpretation. Instead of creating tables, he forms several triangles which represent different forms of borderline autobiographical writing. Yet when he comes to the case of 'autofiction' he finds he must create three variations of triangle, suggesting that a clear-cut definition is harder to pinpoint. For Genette, a book falls under the category 'autofiction' when 'un narrateur identifié à l'auteur y produit un récit de fiction homodiégétique'.<sup>84</sup> This would imply that 'autofiction' is easily definable but a glance at the accompanying triangles hints at the true nature of the autofictive pact, which is described by Genette as 'délibérément contradictoire', exemplified by the clarifying statement 'moi, auteur, je vais vous raconter une histoire dont je suis le héros mais qui ne m'est jamais arrivée'.<sup>85</sup> The triangles indicate that one of the relations in the author = narrator = protagonist theory should be paradoxically broken. For example, the author could share identity with the protagonist, and the narrator with the protagonist also, but the triangle breaks the connection between author and narrator. A reader would normally deduce that if the author is the narrator and the narrator is the protagonist then it should follow that the author is the protagonist. But the story is fictional, and the author hints at this by breaking one of the three links instead of two. It is this theory that 'autofiction' employs, as if to say as Genette writes, 'c'est moi et ce n'est pas moi'.<sup>86</sup>

Vincent Colonna provides 'la fabulation de soi' as a synonym for 'autofiction'.<sup>87</sup> He writes that no clear definition of the notion exists, principally because everyone has understood it according to their own tastes, with the

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<sup>84</sup> Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>87</sup> Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires* (Mayenne: Éditions Tristram, 2004), p. 13.

Larousse definition combining and confusing it with 'roman autobiographique'.<sup>88</sup> He explains that for some critics the originality of 'autofiction' lies in the choice of name for the author and his characters: there is no ambiguity as there is for 'roman autobiographique', where 'les noms seraient cryptés, ou esquivés, surtout celui de l'auteur'.<sup>89</sup> His own definition for 'autofiction' is as follows:

*Tous les composés littéraires où un écrivain s'inscrit sous son nom propre (ou un dérivé indiscutable) dans une histoire qui présente les caractéristiques de la fiction, que ce soit par un contenu irréel, par une conformation conventionnelle (le roman, la comédie) ou par un contrat passé avec le lecteur.*<sup>90</sup>

He goes on to divide 'autofiction' into four subcategories: 'autofiction fantastique', 'biographique', 'spéculaire' and 'intrusive'. It is the second term, 'autofiction biographique', that is the most applicable to the potential classification of *Métaphysique des tubes* and therefore I shall focus on this subcategory of 'autofiction' over than the remaining three. Colonna states that for this subcategory the writer must be the protagonist of the story, 'mais il affabule son existence à partir de données réelles, reste au plus près de la vraisemblance et crédite son texte d'une vérité au moins subjective'.<sup>91</sup> He adds that while some proclaim to check dates and other facts in a bid to create a guise of truth, others move away from 'la réalité phénoménale [...] mais restent plausibles, évitent le fantastique'.<sup>92</sup> However, it is perhaps Colonna's definition of 'autofiction fantastique' that influenced Hélène Jaccomard when she decided to favour an autofictive reading of Nothomb's autobiographical works. Gasparini gives the following definition for the term: '[l]'écrivain est au centre du texte comme dans une autobiographie [...] mais il transfigure son existence et son identité, dans une histoire irréelle, indifférente à la vraisemblance'.<sup>93</sup> Jaccomard summarises *Métaphysique des tubes* as being about 'a baby with the inflated ego

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-1.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

of a God (or a Plant, depending on whom you believe) discovering its self by eating white Belgian chocolate and surviving two drownings',<sup>94</sup> which suggests that it is perhaps the plot's absurdity, or the hyperbolic and exaggerated tendencies of the novel, which call for this particular classification.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the main similarity between Lejeune's, Gasparini's and Colonna's all slightly nuanced definitions of 'le roman autobiographique' is found in the shared scattering of the term 'ambiguïté': ambiguity is directly mentioned by Lejeune in 'le pacte fantasmatique'<sup>95</sup> and indirectly in his definition of 'le roman autobiographique' by the verb 'soupçonner';<sup>96</sup> Gasparini talks of the definition's 'politique ambiguë'<sup>97</sup> and states that whether the written identity is truthful or fictional should also be ambiguous; Colonna highlights the ambiguous nature in the onomastics of a 'roman autobiographique'.<sup>98</sup> While Genette's definition of 'autofiction' could at first seem ambiguous with his descriptive declaration 'c'est moi et ce n'est pas moi',<sup>99</sup> we should be careful to separate ambiguity from paradox. Genette did not choose to write 'est-ce que c'est moi?' but an affirmative statement. This exemplifies how 'autofiction' and 'roman autobiographique' fundamentally differ: an 'autofiction' could be thought of as a statement; the author does not hide identity between himself and the protagonist and writes as though everything is true. However the truth is somehow skewed and actively becomes fiction. Meanwhile the 'roman autobiographique' could be considered an ambiguous guessing game, whereby names are sometimes subtly altered and fiction (or fantasy) softens fact and protects the author as with a mask. But where exactly does this leave Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes*? Based on Nothomb's own

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<sup>94</sup> Hélène Jaccomard, 'Self in Fabula: Amélie Nothomb's Three Autobiographical Works', in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 11-23 (p. 18).

<sup>95</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 42.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>97</sup> *Est-il je?: Roman autobiographique et autofiction*, p. 32.

<sup>98</sup> *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 15.

<sup>99</sup> *Fiction et diction*, p. 84.



views on autobiography and fiction mentioned previously,<sup>100</sup> and on the premises that despite a nameless protagonist the author's readers automatically link her to the young girl based on widely known facts about her upbringing, it would perhaps seem most apt to classify the book as 'roman autobiographique' over 'autofiction'. Yet both definitions are used by different critics who accept one term and reject the other when referring to her autobiographical texts and it is perhaps actually due to Nothomb's tendency to blur fantasy and reality that this is so: not only does the question of ambiguity and believability come into play, but Nothomb also visibly plays with other literary genre boundaries: those of fairy tale and fantasy fiction, clearly connected to the imagination and fantasy, to which she refers.<sup>101</sup> Bainbrigge successfully divides Nothomb's work into autobiographical novels and autofictions (and one play), appearing to use degrees of biographical distortion as a key decider; by this I mean that autobiographical novels are considered to be the works that closely resemble Nothomb's own life, all the while allowing for fantastical references in the plot, while 'autofictions' are considered Nothomb's fictional works, in which elements of her own life are visibly alluded to.<sup>102</sup> For example, using this approach *Métaphysique des tubes* would be considered an autobiographical novel as despite references to fairy tales and Nothomb's childlike exaggerated portrayal of her memories and fantasies, the events in the book mirror Amélie Nothomb's own childhood in Japan. Following Bainbrigge's same approach *Hygiène de l'assassin*<sup>103</sup> would be considered to be an autofiction, as the story is portrayed as fictional while containing strong echoes to Nothomb's own life experiences:

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<sup>100</sup> See 'Le Japon et l'œuvre romanesque d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 64: '[j]'ai pris parti que le fantasme fait partie de la réalité, ce qui est vrai car nos fantasmes font partie de notre vie. [...] on ne sait pas forcément ce qui est fantasme et ce qui est réalité dans ce livre – tout ce que je sais c'est que j'ai tout vécu', and 'je n'étais pas crédible. Ce n'était pas grave. Au fond, cela m'était égal, qu'on me croie ou non. Je continuerais à inventer, pour mon plaisir. [...] Moi au moins, je croyais à ce que je me disais' (MT 115).

<sup>101</sup> See fn. 62.

<sup>102</sup> Susan Bainbrigge, 'Amélie Nothomb: "Une apatride belge"?', in *Culture and Identity in Belgian Francophone Writing*, ed. by Bainbrigge (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 175-200 (p. 175) Bainbrigge states that Nothomb's life can be traced through her autobiographical and autofictional works; (p. 176, fn. 2) This shows Bainbrigge's division of Nothomb's works.

<sup>103</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (Paris: Albin Michel; Édition Points, 1992): all subsequent references to the text will appear as HA followed by the page number.

Nothomb states '[j]e suis Prétextat Tach, oui, je vous le confirme. [...] Je crois que c'est [*Hygiène de l'assassin*] le plus autobiographique de mes livres.'

<sup>104</sup> This is because of the relationship that is described between the male protagonist and Léopoldine and how both, like Nothomb and her sister Juliette, had destructive relationships with food. Nothomb also admits that she generally reveals much more about herself in her fictional works than in her autobiographical novels, but in a disguised manner: 'dans les romans non-autobiographiques, comme par exemple dans *Hygiène de l'assassin*, ou *Attentat*, je me dis "personne ne va savoir que c'est moi, donc je peux y aller: je peux tout déballer; déballons déballons".'<sup>105</sup> Bainbrigge also refers to fantasy and fairy tale in relation to 'otherworldliness',<sup>106</sup> explaining fantasy in terms of travel and isolation. She also emphasises the significance of Nothomb's intertextual references, including references to fairy tales, in her paper "'Monter l'escalier anachronique": Intertextuality in *Mercure*':<sup>107</sup> these are both studies of hers to which I return in due course and which show that the theme of fairy tale and fantasy fiction is rich in Nothomb's work and not solely confined to genre choice.

## Fairy tale and fantasy fiction

It is becoming clear that fairy tale and fantasy fiction share a strong bond in Nothomb's work, and so, although the subsequent chapters will focus on fairy tale and fantasy fiction in greater depth, it is necessary at this point to consider a few of their basic definitions. This will allow us to begin to analyse Nothomb's use of the fairy tale and fantasy fiction in her own '*récits de vie*' towards the end of this chapter. As we shall see below, critics are divided when choosing what they consider to be the most effective way to define the fairy tale.

<sup>104</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 190.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-6.

<sup>106</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: "Une apatride belge"?', p. 185.

<sup>107</sup> Susan Bainbrigge, "'Monter l'escalier anachronique": Intertextuality in *Mercure*', in *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 114-126.

Consequentially, when analysing Nothomb's work I shall consider parts of each individual theory and so study theme, structure, and language used relating to the fairy tale and the effects produced on Nothomb's writing.

According to Jones's definition of folk narratives, the fairy tale is a subgenre of the folktale alongside novellas, jokes and fables: each subgenre uses everyday narratives and protagonists, but fairy tales are quintessentially magical, as opposed to moralistic (fables), humorous (jokes) or romantic (novellas).<sup>108</sup> While myths and legends are also found under his definition of folk narratives, the former genre is formed of 'etiological narratives' with 'immortal protagonists' and the latter of 'quasi-historical narratives' with 'extraordinary protagonists'.<sup>109</sup> In this way, fairy tales are comparatively intriguingly similar to autobiographical fiction: both tell the story of everyday people, with autobiographical fiction rooted in the real world, and fairy tale in the imaginary.

The basic definition of the fairy tale found above is reached by Jones in part by studying Aarne and Thompson's jointly produced *The Types of the Folktale*;<sup>110</sup> a catalogue of tales in which fairy tales are listed as 'Tales of Magic' and grouped under tale type numbers 300-749.<sup>111</sup> A 'tale type' encompasses the various cultural and historical versions of the same basic fairy tale. Jones believes that the catalogue's comparative method of listing fairy tales under tale types helps facilitate the act of defining the fairy tale: '[w]hat we find is that while individual versions may *vary their motifs* [...], they are quite consistent in their *adherence to the plot outline* [...] of the tale type.'<sup>112</sup> This suggests that fairy tales can be defined partially by their reoccurring themes and structure; a point on which Vladimir Propp writes extensively.

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<sup>108</sup> Steven Swann Jones, *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 8.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale*, trans. by Stith Thompson, 2nd edn, rev. by Stith Thompson, FF Communications, 184 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961)

<sup>111</sup> *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

In order to define the fairy tale Propp reduces it to a formula: he does this by assigning different letters, signs and symbols to each function found in a given tale. A 'function' is to be '*understood as an act of character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action*'.<sup>113</sup> He believes this method to provide greater accuracy, as he considers that dividing fairy tales according to categories is unsuccessful, and dividing them according to themes 'leads to total chaos'.<sup>114</sup> In this way he disagrees with the Aarne-Thompson classification system, as it groups stories without commenting on a given motif's impact on the story. Fundamentally Propp defines the fairy tale as 'any development proceeding from villainy (A) or a lack (*a*), through intermediary functions to marriage (W\*), or to other functions employed as a *dénouement*'.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, he concludes from his findings that, although impossible to prove, 'all of the tales given can be morphologically deduced from the tales about the kidnapping of a princess by a dragon – from that form which we are inclined to consider as basic.'<sup>116</sup>

While recognising that Propp's work successfully reveals similarities in the basic structure of the fairy tale plot, Lewis Seifert proves that additional features, such as tone and writing style, must also be considered when defining the fairy tale. Seifert does so by imputing Propp's own symbols, examples and findings into the 'Proppian Fairy Tale Generator'.<sup>117</sup> An individual selects various functions, and a fairy tale is then generated accordingly. Seifert states the following in relation to the resulting story: '[t]he randomly generated fairy tale demonstrates that it is necessary to consider several other elements besides plot

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<sup>113</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Laurence Scott, 2nd edn, rev. by Louis A. Wagner, Publications of the American Folklore Society: Bibliographical and special series, 9 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 21.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>117</sup> Lewis Seifert, 'Vladimir Propp's Theories', *Brown University* (2001)

<[http://www.brown.edu/Courses/FR0133/Fairytales\\_Generator/propp.html](http://www.brown.edu/Courses/FR0133/Fairytales_Generator/propp.html)> [accessed 15 June 2011]

components in order to create a cohesive and well-written tale'.<sup>118</sup> Seifert's notion brings another dimension to the definition of the fairy tale, and suggests that a substantial proportion of fairy tales employ a similar lexis and syntax.

Fantasy fiction is another genre which Nothomb threads commonly through her work. In *The Oxford Companion* Nikolajeva states that this type of fiction 'grows out of the fairy tale',<sup>119</sup> all the while noting its differences in a further study of hers on the subject. She comments, 'fantasy is an eclectic genre, since it borrows traits not just from fairy tales, but from myth, romance, the novel of chivalry, the picaresque, the gothic novel, mysteries, science fiction, and other genres, blending seemingly incompatible elements within one and the same narrative [...]'.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, she explains that fantasy fiction, unlike the fairy tale, is influenced by the modern world and is described as a 'conscious creation' rather than a preservation of a former tale, as is believed to be the case for the fairy tale.<sup>121</sup> Manlove is another critic with a particular interest in fantasy fiction. According to his personal definition, he states that 'a fantasy is: *A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partially familiar terms.*'<sup>122</sup> Numerous other alternative definitions of fantasy fiction exist, and this is an area to which I shall return when studying the similarities between *Peter Pan* and *Métaphysique des tubes* and analysing the impact that Nothomb's use of certain features regularly found in fantasy fiction has on her autobiographical novel. It is by now highly evident that when it comes to pinning down a single classification for the autobiographical writings of Amélie Nothomb, we are met

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., (para. 2 of 2)

<sup>119</sup> 'Fantasy Literature and the Fairy Tale', p. 151.

<sup>120</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, 'Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern', *Marvels & Tales*, 17.1 (2003), 138-56 (p. 139).  
<[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/marvels\\_and\\_tales/v017/17.1nikolajeva.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/marvels_and_tales/v017/17.1nikolajeva.pdf)> [accessed 1 September 2011]

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Colin N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 1.

with great ambiguity: perhaps this is Nothomb's active aim. Amanieux writes that 'la romancière souhaite évoluer en dehors des engagements idéologiques, ce qui nécessite qu'elle inscrive constamment ses textes dans des jeux de déguisements et de déformations qui les rendent difficilement classables'.<sup>123</sup> It seems worthwhile to analyse specific parts of *Métaphysique des tubes* in an attempt to untangle the web of distortions she has created. I have firstly chosen to look at the very beginning of the book, followed by a detailed reading of the third (unnumbered) chapter, where 'il' first becomes 'je' and the realms of fantasy and fairy tale arguably commence, replacing myth.

### Clarifying the unclassifiable: a close reading of *Métaphysique des tubes*

'Au commencement il n'y avait rien. Et ce rien n'était ni vide ni vague : il n'appelait rien d'autre que lui-même. Et Dieu vit que cela était bon' (MT 5): The reader is not given the expected autobiographical beginnings when starting this novel; instead s/he encounters God. All claims regarding the book being an autobiography are instantly destabilised as there is a clear fictional style to her writing. Additionally, by using 'Dieu' not only is no gender for the protagonist discernible but the author-narrator-protagonist unity is broken through the use of a third-person narrator, provoking, as Mark Lee describes, 'un point de vue de narration initialement désorientant'.<sup>124</sup> According to Lee, the two elements combined impact on the reader in the following way: '[l]e lecteur pourrait croire avoir affaire à un récit purement mythique – avec Dieu comme personnage principal – et non au récit autobiographique d'une personne.'<sup>125</sup> Yet, were we to reconsider this mythical beginning according to the Freudian and Lacanian theories previously discussed, we might change the way we interpret it. Nothomb's choice to use 'il' over 'je' could be seen to make perfect sense, be *more* accurate even, given that no 'ego' has been formed by the protagonist. Not

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<sup>123</sup> *Le récit siamois*, p. 27.

<sup>124</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 82.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

only has no 'ego' been formed, but also seemingly no 'id'. For 'id' represents a human's basic needs and desires, of which 'Dieu' is considerably lacking: 'Dieu était l'absolue satisfaction. Il ne voulait rien, n'attendait rien, ne percevait rien, ne refusait rien et ne s'intéressait à rien' (MT 5). If Nothomb's narrator has neither an ego nor an id, then it is understandable that the first section of text is written in the third-person as no 'I' has formed to allow for text to be written in the first-person. There is at least some reason to consider this theory given that Nothomb would appear to be translating a preverbal phase into language rather than using her narrator to actively write fiction, with her desire to accurately portray the baby's perception leading to a third-person narrative describing a God. Nothomb explains her choice to liken the baby's perception of the world to a third-person God by stating '*logique pour un petit enfant de se prendre pour Dieu car on a l'impression de créer la réalité*'.<sup>126</sup> This is perhaps why Michel David views the book as a 'reconstruction, voire une traduction qui cherche à saisir et à retranscrire les premières perceptions du monde', leading him to classify the book as a 'roman autobiographique'.<sup>127</sup> Mark Lee seems to agree with this, deciding on the same classification before adding 'comme ce roman le confirmera, qu'on veuille [*sic*] ou non tout récit des origines relève finalement d'une invention mythique'.<sup>128</sup>

However we have seen that Hélène Jaccomard chooses a different label for the book, 'autofiction', while expressing similar beliefs concerning the book's beginning. 'Rien de plus logique que les premiers mots de la *Métaphysique des tubes*',<sup>129</sup> according to Jaccomard based on the same aforementioned psychoanalytical theories. Discussing Nothomb's onomastic choice to call the protagonist God, she writes: 'Dieu sert de nom commode pour baptiser l'égocentrisme monumental du nouveau-né, aux yeux duquel le monde vient à

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<sup>126</sup> Michel David, *Amélie Nothomb: Le symptôme graphomane* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>128</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 84.

<sup>129</sup> Hélène Jaccomard, 'Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Nothomb', *L'esprit créateur*, 42 (Winter 2002), 45-57 (p. 47).

l'existence à partir du moment de sa naissance.'<sup>130</sup> She proceeds to add that Nothomb 's'efforce de dépeindre l'univers du ressenti de l'enfant qu'elle a été'.<sup>131</sup> Yet she nuances this idea and rewrites it for her 2003 article *Self in Fabula*, writing 'her remarkable feat is to make us forget that she is not writing her memories, be they early ones, but reconstructing pre-verbal sensations'.<sup>132</sup> She also points out that 'Nothomb goes much further than any of her predecessors in her insistence on the metaphysical nature of infancy'.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps then, it is Nothomb's need to disguise her earliest sensations as memories and attach 'fictional truth'<sup>134</sup> to them that persuades Jaccomard to favour an autofictive reading of the novel over an autobiographical one? Or maybe Jaccomard is not convinced by Nothomb's ability to remember her past, especially when no conceptual memories, only sensations, exist. For, despite the abundance of proclamations Nothomb makes in interviews and in *Métaphysique des tubes* of her ability to almost faultlessly remember the past, there are a few statements that the author makes which could destabilise the reader's belief and trust in this ability: '[f]ranchement, je ne me souviens pas des événements avant deux ans et demi mais j'en conserve de vagues impressions'.<sup>135</sup> Jaccomard also applies to Nothomb's autobiographical works the label 'conte autobiographique', fundamentally because 'la fable devient principe d'écriture dans une dialectique du masque et du dévoilement'.<sup>136</sup> I wonder whether Jaccomard considers the 'conte autobiographique' to sit somewhere between 'autofiction' and 'roman autobiographique': Jaccomard is keen to highlight the hyperbolic and exaggerated style and content that incline her towards 'autofiction' as a classification, yet recognises 'une dialectique du masque et du dévoilement',

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> 'Self in Fabula', p. 13.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> See; *Le symptôme graphomane*, pp. 46-7: Michel interprets the fictional, mythical, element of Nothomb's story to be a translation of her preverbal existence; *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 84: Lee describes every birth to be a mythical invention. 'Fictional truth' is a paradoxical phrase I have chosen to use to summarize this notion.

<sup>135</sup> *Amélie Nothomb de A à Z*, p. 55.

<sup>136</sup> 'Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 45.



which is described by Gasparini ('le double mouvement d'aveu et de déni')<sup>137</sup> to be a fundamental element of a 'roman autobiographique'.

### The weight of perception

The beginning of chapter three of Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes* sees a continuation of the third-person narration established in the first lines of the book. Yet the role of perceptions, which was also important at the start of the novel, takes on larger and more complex proportions. The language and content seem to oscillate endlessly from a childlike to a mature level, which has interesting implications for the text. Chapter three starts by setting the scene in a seemingly traditional fashion, but Nothomb's presence as a writer in the text can quickly be spotted by her humorous irony that ends the introductory remarks: '[c]'était un jour ordinaire. Il ne s'était rien passé de spécial. Les parents exerçaient leur métier de parents, les enfants exécutaient leur mission d'enfants, le tube se concentrait sur sa vocation cylindrique' (MT 21). However the scene setting is only momentary and what could have been considered a prototype for an omniscient scene-setting fictional narrator transforms into a mature and musing philosopher: '[l]es événements les plus fondamentaux de l'humanité sont passés presque inaperçus' (MT 21). But not for long, for we quickly return to a narrative slant: '[s]oudain, la maison se mit à retentir de hurlements' (MT 21). The chapter continues in the same fashion, oscillating to and fro between the angles of third-person narration until an almost 'amen'-like interjection with '[s]ic transit tubi gloria' (MT 24). I would suggest that she is manipulating the Latin phrase 'sic transit Gloria mundi'. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, the latter translates as 'thus passes the glory of the world' and is spoken when a new Pope is coronated.<sup>138</sup> The Oxford definition adds that despite being used in 1409 at the coronation of Alexander V, it is earlier in origin,

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<sup>137</sup> *Est-il je?: Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>138</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. by Elizabeth Knowles, 7th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 23.

before referring the reader to Thomas à Kempis, a German writer.<sup>139</sup> Among his quotes we find the following: '[o] *quam cito transit gloria mundi* [oh how quickly the glory of the world passes away]', found in *De Imitatione Christi*.<sup>140</sup> Applied to the Nothombian text, this would imply that the 'accident mental' which caused 'cette naissance postérieure de deux ans à l'accouchement' (MT 23) brought about the genuine demise ('passing away') of 'Dieu le tube' ('glory') despite the use of 'Dieu' until the third and final birth, which changes 'il' to a first person narration. My reasoning behind comparing the Latin interjection with 'amen', commonly known to end a prayer, is that '[s]ic transit tubi gloria' ends the divine biblically mythological state of 'Dieu le tube' in the purest form, before his 'birth' though 'l'accident mental', turning calm into chaos. Additionally, the way that the sentence is separated from the main body of text on a new line with a double-line gap between it and the next paragraph mimics the end of a prayer and clearly emphasises the break in continuity that is about to follow.

It is shortly after this that the text is injected with yet another angle of third-person narration. 'Il avait observé que les parents et leurs satellites produisaient avec leur bouche des sons articulés bien précis' (MT 25). This is the beginning of the childlike narration; describing scenes as an imaginative child would perceive and word them. Another example of this is seen during God's encounter with white chocolate: '[d]e ces mots, Dieu ne comprend que "blanc": il connaît, il a vu ça sur le lait et les murs' (MT 29). A remark that Frédérique Chevillot makes in her study of another autobiographical novel, *Le Sabotage amoureux*, is also applicable to *Métaphysique des tubes* with slight alterations: '[d]ans une certaine mesure, et avec beaucoup d'humour, Nothomb, jeune femme adulte, ironise tout en la cajolant sur Amélie, enfant.'<sup>141</sup> She adds later that 'c'est une petite fille qui parle, mais c'est une adulte qui rédige et

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 804.

<sup>141</sup> Frédérique Chevillot, 'Antéchristique Amélie Nothomb: De rire, de guerre et des femmes dans *Le Sabotage amoureux*', *Women in French Studies*, 15 Special Issue (2005), 158-67 (p. 161).

indirectement commente'.<sup>142</sup> Instead of a young girl we have an angry God-tube, but as we have seen there is some conflict between various narrators: the prototypical omniscient narrator, the adult philosopher and the baby, all forming parts of Nothomb's identity, with the adult philosopher reinterpreting the thoughts of the baby and the general plot.

However, something curious occurs after the protagonist is born for the third time, after the chocolate scene which we will revisit shortly: all three parts merge and transform into a first-person narrator. I would argue that some separation is retained, yet it is slightly altered: the presence of the writer becomes more apparent. 'Je me comprends. A l'âge de deux ans, j'étais sortie de ma torpeur, pour découvrir que la vie était une vallée de larmes' (MT 33), Nothomb writes; now implying her relationship to the protagonist based on hints of corresponding biographical information: '[c]e fut alors que je naquis, à l'âge de deux ans et demi, en février 1970, dans les montagnes du Kansai' (MT 30-1). She still reinterprets her former memories, but hints at their childlike nature by use of hyperbole and fantasy, as we are about to see, while using the language of an adult. Nothomb states: '[q]uand on écrit sur la toute petite enfance, on a un choix. Soit on décide de le faire avec le langage qui était le sien à l'époque [or] [...] prendre le langage d'une personne de trente-trois ans.'<sup>143</sup> In fact, there does not appear to be a choice as far as *Métaphysique des tubes* is concerned, since the first option described in the interview is impossible when the act of learning to speak and voice vocabulary is being learnt by the protagonist as the plot progresses. This point makes it easy for Nothomb to settle on the latter option. This choice could be seen as paradoxically more reliable, if less accurate, given that adults clearly have a far wider vocabulary to use when attempting to find the most accurate wording of their thoughts and sensations. So, once again we are met with two ways to interpret Nothomb's literary style: some may consider this technique a quest for accuracy on the part of the author while others could

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>143</sup> Amélie Nothomb *de A à Z*, pp. 54-5.

consider Nothomb to be in fact trying to gain control as a writer and manipulate her text in puppeteer fashion.<sup>144</sup>

Whichever way we decide to view Nothomb's method, Laureline Amanieux would encourage a 'roman autobiographique' reading of the text based on multiple points of view which highlight the importance of multiple perceptions: the manipulative efforts of the author, according to Amanieux, should be seen not as an attempt to fabricate a series of non-truths and make them seem real, but as a distancing of herself from reality by what she calls a 'transposition romanesque'.<sup>145</sup> This term is based on a theory elaborated by Yves Baudelle, who states the following regarding the division of 'autofiction' from 'roman autobiographique': '[l]'appellation d'autofiction ne devient donc intelligible qu'à partir du moment où l'auteur donne effectivement dans la fiction et s'invente tout en manipulant la triple identité onomastique'.<sup>146</sup> Baudelle adds: '[d]u moment que l'expérience est réécrite dans le sens de la fiction, par un auteur qui est à la fois le narrateur et le personnage [...] nous sommes dans l'autofiction'.<sup>147</sup> The playful manipulation seen in the narration through the various sides of a third-person narrator before transforming into first-person narrator leads to the comic and light writing style, which makes her books so readable: '[l]a transposition de soi dans les romans autobiographiques laisse la place à une tonalité plus légère et comique lorsqu'il s'agit de raconter des expériences difficiles'.<sup>148</sup> There is, however, another possible outcome that is more applicable to later parts of *Métaphysique des tubes*, such as the grandmother's death: '[r]aconter la douleur passe pour la romancière par un

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<sup>144</sup> Anna Kemp, 'The Self as Work of Art in Contemporary Women's Writing' in *A Decade of Women's Writing in France: Trends and Horizons 2000-2010 IGRS Conference* (14-16 October, 2010): Kemp also uses the metaphor of Nothomb as the puppet master of the characters in her novels, detailing several occasions in which Nothomb makes her presence as an author known in her texts, either by entering the text as a character with a dubiously disguised name as is the case in *Mercure*, or by Nothomb's controlled writing style.

<sup>145</sup> *Le récit siamois*, p. 210.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213, fn. 12.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

récit paradoxal: entre une mise en récit brève et un refus du récit.’<sup>149</sup> Either way, ‘la romancière refigure ainsi l’expérience réelle avec une âme romanesque’<sup>150</sup> which in turn creates a mask that Nothomb wears to distance her deepest truths, her emotions, from the reader.

### The language and imagery of fairy tales

In his essay ‘Amélie Nothomb and the Poetics of Excess’, David Gascoigne highlights the fundamental role that language plays in Nothomb’s ‘fire-and-ice universe’.<sup>151</sup> ‘Nothomb places the voice, and language, firmly under the aegis of passion, be it pleasure or anger, viewing the language as the channelled response to an overflow of feeling’,<sup>152</sup> he writes, drawn from the fact that the first verbal expression is the baby’s scream and that the ability to learn to speak is permitted by the euphoric pleasure experienced by eating Belgian chocolate, which forms her identity: ‘[l]e plaisir est une merveille, qui m’apprend que je suis moi. Moi, c’est le siège du plaisir. Le plaisir, c’est moi’ (*MT* 31). Gascoigne explains that in *Métaphysique des tubes* language is associated with power and control, especially when related to the act of naming, which, he writes, is ‘arguably’ the ‘primal linguistic act’.<sup>153</sup> When considering her first few words, the narrator writes: ‘[i]l est vrai que dire les choses à haute voix est différent: cela confère au mot prononcé une valeur exceptionnelle [...]. Voiser [*sic*] le vocable “banane”, c’est rendre hommage aux bananes à travers les siècles’ (*MT* 38). The power and control gained with language is the ability to give objects importance, or even to confirm someone’s existence, as is seen with the act of naming her parents. ‘Parler était un prélude au combat’ (*MT* 43), she adds, after giving the example of sibling accusations of Lego theft. Finally, not only are words seen to

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>151</sup> David Gascoigne, ‘Amélie Nothomb and the Poetics of Excess’, in *Amélie Nothomb*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 127-134 (p. 127).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

punish when actively not naming someone, but 'parler pouvait donc servir aussi à assassiner' (MT 43), when Nishio-san tells stories detailing her sister's death. These few examples illustrate how language is seen to be a marvellous and powerful discovery, born of rapture and rage. Both will team together to form a Nothombian alliance. However, the emerging image, that of Dionysian extremes, forms the basis of a later chapter, *Beauty and the Beast*.

Gascoigne also believes that all characters in Nothomb's novels are subjected to the poetics of excess, 'this need in life truly lived for the passion which overflows reasonable and decent limits'.<sup>154</sup> But he adds that the life of extremes that she creates for her fictional and autobiographical characters alike is reflected in and mimicked by her theory of language: 'she puts her own writing practice in touch with its roots, and with that primal well-spring of raw emotions on which, as her fictions insistently suggest, our very being is founded'.<sup>155</sup> According to Gascoigne, it would seem that the fundamental outcome of analysing the poetics of excess is the link that emerges between form and content. As shown above, Nothomb's first encounters with language are provoked by intense emotions of both rage and passion. If language is born of Dionysian extremes, then *both* the style and content of *Métaphysique des tubes* should become hyperbolic, theatrical even as for Nothomb the act of naming, writing, is a comparable to the act of creating. Yet I believe the union of these literary elements may also have a further outcome, which is hinted at by Gascoigne in passing. Analysing *Le Sabotage amoureux*, he writes 'names are here seen as a magic spell to exert power and reconfigure the world'.<sup>156</sup> This idea also resonates in earlier examples in *Métaphysique des tubes*, where words have the seemingly magical power to create, kill, cause conflict and harm. Given the theory that there is an alliance between form and content, what is seen as magical should express itself in a magical way, which for literature would suggest the form of fairy tale. I would suggest that Jaccomard's term 'conte

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

autobiographique' may be a suitable classification for a different reason. While Jacomard considers *Métaphysique des tubes* a 'conte autobiographique' for its ability to mask and reveal various elements of Nothomb's childhood by using elements of the fairy tale,<sup>157</sup> it could also be argued that Nothomb uses these same fairy tale elements to recount her earliest years as they aptly translate her preverbal sensations. *Métaphysique des tubes* could be considered a 'conte autobiographique' because it is at once an autobiography and a fairy tale, rather than an autofictive fairy tale, which suggests that the fiction has greater presence than fact.

It is the moment surrounding the protagonist's third birth, induced by chocolate, which I would like to analyse in order to trial this theory. The scene is described by Jacomard in the following way: '[a]s in a fairy-tale she is bestowed a faith – the primacy of her Self – when eating a piece of chocolate [...] proffered by a good fairy.'<sup>158</sup> It is 'digne d'un conte de fées' as Mark Lee puts it, as the grandmother 'arrive telle une bonne fée pour administrer une potion magique à l'enfant, afin de libérer sa voix narrative et les prémices d'une identité implicitement tenues prisonnières dans son état de Plante'.<sup>159</sup> Amanieux introduces a further example in the same vein: 'Nothomb raconte, dans un style qui emprunte à la merveille des contes, l'instant où sa grand-mère lui tend une barre de chocolat.'<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, not only is Nothomb's magical tone widely established by critics, but it also seems that another fairy-tale theme is present just before the chocolaty kiss of life: taming the beast.<sup>161</sup> It could be seen that Nothomb's devouring of the magical chocolate is not so much a loosely-knitted idea but a reinterpretation of a major theme which incorporates various others.

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<sup>157</sup> 'Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 45.

<sup>158</sup> 'Self in Fabula', p. 14.

<sup>159</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 111.

<sup>160</sup> *Amélie Nothomb: L'éternelle affamée*, p. 21

<sup>161</sup> This is a widely acknowledged fairy tale theme, to which Jack Zipes alludes by his paper's title 'The Origins of the Fairy Tale for Children or, How Script Was Used to Tame the Beast in Us', in *Children and Their Books*, ed. by Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 119-34.

The third-person protagonist is clearly described in such a way as to compare him to a fairy-tale-like beast: ‘ses pupilles étaient entièrement noires, d’un noir de paysage incendié’ (MT 22); later they are described again as ‘noir de rage’ (MT 23). Not only is his (‘Dieu’) outwardly appearance beastly, but also his temperament: ‘l’enfant était furieux. Une colère fabuleuse [...]’ (MT 22); ‘il hurlait de plus belle et de plus laide’ (MT 26); ‘[d]eux ans et demi. Cris, rage, haine’ (MT 28). The choice to describe the baby-beast’s howling as ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ shows the Dionysian extremes that were mentioned above, while also flagging the importance of beauty and ugliness in Nothomb’s novels, which is to be studied alongside the reading of *Beauty and the Beast*. ‘Il grimace de dégoût et salive de désir’ (MT 30), is another example of the paradoxical juxtaposition of emotions so widespread in her work. Furthermore, the protagonist, in his current state, forms one of the ‘bêtes braillardes’ (MT 23-4) and is described also as ‘un chiot doberman’ (MT 26), living in ‘l’ancre du monstre’ (MT 28). References to beasts clearly permeate Nothomb’s novel, and especially when associated with the protagonist are qualified with descriptions of anger and rage: ‘[s]oudain, la maison se mit à retenir de hurlements’ (MT 21). Nothomb’s beast, after finding out he cannot speak ‘trouvait cette situation humiliante et intolérable. La colère s’emparait de lui et il se mettait à hurler sa rage’ (MT 25). Yet by tasting the Belgian chocolate and experiencing pleasure, the beast is finally tamed, and a new identity is formed for the protagonist: ‘Je ne suis pas “il” ni “lui”, je suis moi!’ (MT 30). Thus we can see that the taming of the beast is to some extent visible in this chapter of *Métaphysique des tubes*. The topic of beastliness is one that resonates throughout Nothomb’s other novels: during the second chapter of my thesis I will return to the theme in order to undertake an analysis of other images of beastliness found in *Métaphysique des tubes* which are also apparent in her other works.



## Defying classification: a hybrid genre

The study above, taking into account several literary genres, has shown that it is difficult to apply one fixed label to Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes*. Yet one may still wonder what genre or subgenre the novel could actually fit into: Nothomb's book is classed as autobiography for some (Lambert-Perreault),<sup>162</sup> 'roman autobiographique' for others (Amanieux,<sup>163</sup> Bainbrigg,<sup>164</sup> Lee,<sup>165</sup> Michel),<sup>166</sup> 'autofiction' for others still (Topping)<sup>167</sup> with the further suggestion of 'conte autobiographique' (Jacomard).<sup>168</sup> In Amélie Nothomb's case, it would seem that intentional ambiguity on her part leads to a literary hybridity of genre. The book is a self-proclaimed autobiography, paradoxically given the label 'roman', said to be a 'roman autobiographique' by the author in certain interviews, all the while the content of the novel repeatedly expressed by Nothomb to have been totally 'vécu'. Amanieux and Lee consider the book a 'roman autobiographique' for its playful hide-and-seek qualities, talking of masks, 'transposition romanesque', and manipulative form used to disguise what is fundamentally accurate and true in a bid for self-preservation. Their classification thrives on the disruption to the author-narrator-protagonist identity by omission of a first name for the young protagonist, abiding by what Lee terms '[l]e pacte presque autobiographique'.<sup>169</sup> Jacomard offers 'conte autobiographique' as a nuanced theory to 'autofiction' after revising her work. Fundamentally, it would seem that everything hangs on

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<sup>162</sup> 'La mélancolie comme structure infralangagière de l'œuvre d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 3: 'j'estime que le terme "autobiographie" constitue l'étiquette générique la plus apte à qualifier les récits susnommés.'

<sup>163</sup> *Le récit siamois*, p. 209: 'le roman autobiographique' is the conclusion reached by Amanieux after an Yves Baudelle reading of the term, noted previously in this chapter.

<sup>164</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: "Une apatride belge"?', p. 175.

<sup>165</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, pp. 115-9.

<sup>166</sup> *Le symptôme graphomane*, p. 25: 'ses cinq roman autobiographiques (*Le Sabotage amoureux*, *Métaphysique des tubes* [...])'.

<sup>167</sup> 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 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 81-97 (p. 82): 'autofictional works by Nothomb [...] notably *Métaphysique des tubes*'. While Topping is not directly studied in this chapter, I will consider her paper in the third chapter, and as such have noted her opinion on the book's classification here.

<sup>168</sup> 'Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Nothomb', p. 45.

<sup>169</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 115.

the importance placed on the omission of the name and the extent to which the work veers away from realism. One thing, at least, is certain: every critic has alluded to or mentioned specifically the fairy-tale undertones of the text, where boundary blurring and pastiche are as necessary to her writing as pleasure is to the protagonist. Yet if we try to label *Métaphysique des tubes* we will not easily get our 'happily ever after': Nothomb's hybrid style leads to several possible interpretations, denying the story a stable and clear-cut definition. As we shall come to see, this deprivation is a recurrent theme, and *Métaphysique des tubes* will prove to be a paragon of Nothombian creation.

## Chapter 2:

### **The status of *La Belle et la Bête* in *Métaphysique des tubes***

The omnipresence of beauty and beastliness is evident in *Métaphysique des tubes*, but it was while reading Bainbrigge and den Toonder's *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice* that the extent of parallels between the traditional fairy tale, *La Belle et la Bête*, and Nothomb's contemporary novel became clear and my suspicions surrounding the status of the fairy tale in Nothomb's writing were confirmed. It became apparent that similarities were not limited to lexical echoes between the fairy tale's title and Nothomb's content and that the fairy tale theme was deeply embedded in Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes*, as well as her other novels, supporting my notion that there was more ground and evidence on which to base a comparative analysis. The various essays in the Bainbrigge and den Toonder collection are indicative of this: Catherine Rodgers' 'Anorexic Beauties'<sup>170</sup> and Le Garrec's 'Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts'<sup>171</sup> are just two examples of papers which contain paradox and a juxtaposition of terms relating to beauty and beastliness, suggesting that Nothomb takes apart the traditional themes of the tale and refashions them. While she clearly plays with and blurs the boundaries of beauty and beastliness, she additionally uses water symbolism, present in *La Belle et la Bête*, to reveal or strengthen aspects of her identity. Understanding why Nothomb both consciously and subconsciously turns to the fairy tale, and in particular to *La Belle et la Bête*, to recount her childhood enriches the aforementioned themes of water, beauty and beastliness. In view of this, the significance of the fairy tale and its value for adult readers and authors will be considered before a comparative analysis of *Métaphysique des tubes* and *La Belle et la Bête* is undertaken.

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<sup>170</sup> Catherine Rodgers, 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties' in *Amélie Nothomb*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 50-63.

<sup>171</sup> Léniaik Le Garrec, 'Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts' in *Amélie Nothomb*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 64-70.

## The origins of the contemporary fairy tale

Steven Jones writes in *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, 'Fairy tales are a variegated and ever-varying phenomenon',<sup>172</sup> which are born of folklore and date back to 'well before recorded history itself'.<sup>173</sup> Yet, in the modern era, given that a fairy tale spans a multitude of cultures, 'circulate[s] over hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years',<sup>174</sup> and coexists with 'belles lettres',<sup>175</sup> where we may expect to find a contemporary version unrecognizable to its prototype, as if the result of a failed game of Chinese Whispers, where a given story 'may have metamorphosed into something totally unrelated and somewhat baffling',<sup>176</sup> instead we find fundamentally the same plot, with '*significant formal continuities* [sic]',<sup>177</sup> that will be touched upon later in this chapter. The surprising stability of a fairy tale 'tale type',<sup>178</sup> a term used to define a basic fairy tale story by 'the sum of its versions',<sup>179</sup> as previously explained in the first chapter of this thesis, confirms that the fairy tale is a much loved, valued and important tradition and now literary genre. A given tale type, not drastically altered to an unrecognizable state, 'demonstrates that it has touched people's lives',<sup>180</sup> Jones writes, adding 'it is loved because it tells us something about ourselves that we want and need to know.'<sup>181</sup> Thus we turn to the fairy tale at times in search of ourselves, and consequently I would suggest that Nothomb's use of and reference to fairy tale in her work forms part of her quest for self-discovery and understanding of her childhood years. Such a belief will also be supported later

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<sup>172</sup> *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, p. 3.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>176</sup> 'Intergenerational Games', *Volunteering Qld: Resource Central*

<<http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au/home/resources/Intergenerational%20games.pdf?>>  
[accessed 23 March 2011] (p. 4 of PDF)

<sup>177</sup> *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, p. 3.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

in the chapter by examining Bettelheim's theories in *The Uses of Enchantment*,<sup>182</sup> alongside notions about childhood development formed by Adam Phillips in *The Beast in the Nursery*.<sup>183</sup>

However, while we can ascertain the longevity of tale types and of the genre itself, what cannot be denied is the evolution of its target audience: the fairy tale is now considered a genre aimed predominately at children, yet this is actually a relatively recent development. Critics are divided as to who originally began to adapt fairy tales specifically for children: Pascale Accardo states that 'the fashion was inaugurated by Charles Perrault (1628-1703) with a series of morality tales for the education of children, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez* [sic] (1695)',<sup>184</sup> whereas Jack Zipes juxtaposes this belief with his own, writing 'it is absurd to date the origin of the literary fairy tale for children with the publication of Perrault's tales'<sup>185</sup> given that 'they were *not* told or written for children'<sup>186</sup> even if his stories did later become popular among the younger audience. However what is commonly accepted is that the fashion of the literary fairy tale, as opposed to the purely oratorical, arose as a result of the '*jeux d'esprit*'<sup>187</sup> within French aristocratic salons towards the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>188</sup> By the turn of the century the game, in which 'embellishment, improvisation, and experimentation with known folk or literary motifs were stressed',<sup>189</sup> had become so acceptable that the members of the predominately female salons began to write down their creations for publication.<sup>190</sup> It was through this game that *La Belle et la Bête* was eventually conceived of in the version that we know today, and Accardo explains this by focusing on three main

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<sup>182</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1976; St Ives: Penguin Books, 1991)

<sup>183</sup> Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999)

<sup>184</sup> Pasquale Accardo, *The Metamorphosis of Apuleius* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 69.

<sup>185</sup> 'The Origins of the Fairy Tale for Children or, How Script Was Used to Tame the Beast in Us', p. 124.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

French versions as evolutionary steps to the tale. Firstly, drawing from motifs and themes that the Roman writer, Apuleius, wrote of in his tale of *Cupid and Psyche* in *The Golden Ass* in the mid-second century AD,<sup>191</sup> and reworking them into her own tales, Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Comtesse d'Aulnoy published *Le Serpentin Vert* in *Les Contes de Fées* (1696-1697). Accardo states the collection had 'an adult agenda' and that her stories were 'not simply nursery tales for children'.<sup>192</sup> Later, in 1740, Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve wrote *La Belle et la Bête*, also translating themes found in Apuleius's aforementioned story.<sup>193</sup> Finally, in 1756, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont rewrote Madame de Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête* with the specific intention of directing it at children.<sup>194</sup> While *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* specifies various other sources that could have conditioned Madame de Beaumont's creation, such as several tales by Charles Perrault, as well as highlighting alternative versions that proceed it, such as stories by the Brothers Grimm,<sup>195</sup> it is still maintained that Madame de Beaumont's version, published in her own magazine, *Le Magasin des Enfants, ou dialogues entre une sage Gouvernante et plusieurs de ses Élèves de la première Distinction [sic]*, in 1756,<sup>196</sup> 'is perhaps the most famous in the world'.<sup>197</sup> Betsy Hearne, in her study of the tale, concludes that Beaumont's version is 'undoubtedly the best and most loved version'.<sup>198</sup> For its popularity and because it is aimed at children, I have chosen to base my comparative study on Beaumont's version of the tale type. While Nothomb's novel is not a children's story, I am interested in how the children's version of a fairy tale helps preserve childhood memories and is useful to the adult reader

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>192</sup> *The Metamorphosis of Apuleius*, p. 69

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>195</sup> Ruth B. Bottigheimer, 'Beauty and the Beast', in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 45-49 (p. 47).

<sup>196</sup> *The Metamorphosis of Apuleius*, p. 79. The year of publication is found as 1957 in *The Oxford Companion*, p. 47, but this refers instead to the English translation as opposed to the original French text.

<sup>197</sup> Jack Zipes, 'Leprince de Beaumont, Jeanne-Marie', in *The Oxford Companion*, ed. by Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 294-296 (p. 294).

<sup>198</sup> Betsy Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and revisions of an old tale* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 123.

and writer. I will start by looking specifically at the influence of fairy tales on children and childhood writing, then move on to highlight echoes in theme and content between fairy tale tradition and Nothomb's contemporary formula as well as between the two texts, all the while analysing how Nothomb steps away from the traditional model of the fairy tale in order to reconsider key elements of *La Belle et la Bête*.

### Fairy tales for children and childhood recollection

In her book *Myth and Fairy Tale in Women's Fiction*, Susan Sellers writes of an 'Aladdin's cave of interpretations' to describe the rich and varied theories attributed to the role and function of the fairy tale.<sup>199</sup> One of the notions that emerges from this 'Aladdin's cave' belongs to a group of individuals who consider the fairy tale to be beneficial to the developing child. Susan Sellers quotes Cronan Rose in describing fairy tales as 'embryonic stories of development',<sup>200</sup> and explains Maureen Duffy's belief that 'they enable children to participate emotionally in situations they are still too immature to understand'.<sup>201</sup> It is a category that I would suggest Mme de Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête* fits securely into, given its younger target audience. Defining Mme de Beaumont in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, Jack Zipes states:

Mme Leprince de Beaumont was one of the first French writers to write fairy tales explicitly for children, and thus she kept her language and plot simple to convey her major moral messages. Though her style was limited by the lesson she wanted to teach, she was careful not to destroy the magic in her tales [...].<sup>202</sup>

Given Beaumont's success, we can expect children's fairy tales to follow a similar structure to those first seen with the French writer in the form of a simplified story. Susan Sellers explains Bruno Bettelheim's theory that 'by reducing the

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<sup>199</sup> Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> 'Leprince de Beaumont, Jeanne-Marie', p. 296.

complicated and difficult process of socialisation to its constituent paradigms',<sup>203</sup> fairy tales help lead the symbolic way to independent adult existence. While Sellers does not support Bettelheim's theory that fairy tales speak first and foremost to children, she does agree that 'they can impact on adult life with all the resonance and force childhood memories produce',<sup>204</sup> and acknowledges his work as highly influential in the field of childhood development.<sup>205</sup> Adam Phillips also believes that fairy tales are beneficial to adults for reasons in addition to recreational pleasure: he states that by re-reading fairy tales an adult is reunited with previous childhood memories that would have initially been attached to a particular story, forming a bridge between past and present:

It is appetite that makes things edible, just as it is imagination that makes lives liveable, once they are economically viable. And, as children take for granted, lives are only liveable if they give pleasure: that is, if we can renew our pleasures, remember our intensities.<sup>206</sup>

Phillips considers that 'the self is a thing of the past',<sup>207</sup> and values Freudian psychoanalytical theories briefly discussed in the initial chapter of this work in relation to memory, fantasy and repression. He uses these Freudian theories to form the view that, in order to better discover who we are, it is helpful to reconsider our favourite childhood fairy tales alongside other memories. I emphasise the importance that the fairy tale has on the child and adult alike because the role that the fairy tale plays in a child's development as well as on an adult's identity begins to clarify why Amélie Nothomb may turn to the genre in order to portray events and emotions experienced throughout her early childhood. As noted above, Sellers and Phillips suggest that fairy tales and childhood memories are strongly connected: fairy tales act as a time capsule, vividly preserving childhood memories and the emotions attached to them.

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<sup>203</sup> *Myth and Fairy Tale in Women's Fiction*, p. 10.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *The Beast in the Nursery*, p. 7.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.



These emotions and memories are then rediscovered years later when reading the same tale as an adult. This idea is formed in part by Bettelheim's theory on childhood development, which explains why fairy tales acquire this function and are particularly useful to children.

Bettelheim argues that due to the differences between the workings of the child and adult brain, fairy tales, as opposed to rational conversations with parents, talk about a child's problems 'in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and – without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails – offers examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties'.<sup>208</sup> He also suggests that a parent is likely at times to overlook painful emotions in a child for the discomfort that arises in recognizing them, whereas a fairy tale deals with evil and malice,<sup>209</sup> providing the child with distance and an external outlet for overwhelming feelings which could otherwise translate indirectly into a 'fear of the dark, of some animal' or 'anxiety about his body'.<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, whereas the adult can subconsciously interpret the darker side of his world through dreams and fantasies, which decreases the adult's need for fairy tales,<sup>211</sup> a child cannot: 'children cannot and should not analyze their dreams', Bettelheim writes, for the reason that 'a child's dreams contain unconscious content that remains practically unshaped by his ego; the higher mental functions hardly enter into his dream production'.<sup>212</sup> Fairy tales can thus be used in the place of dream interpretation, since a child can interpret the story in a multitude of ways, and 'extract different meaning from the same fairy tale, depending on his interests and needs of the moment'.<sup>213</sup> Additionally, a child's view of the world is both animistic and polarized until the age of puberty;

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<sup>208</sup> *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 6.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

a perception which is then paralleled by the fairy tale, where characters are rarely ambivalent.<sup>214</sup>

Fairy tales are especially important to a child because, as shown by Bettelheim, they fulfil a variety of needs that are not fulfilled as easily elsewhere until the child has further developed. This means that children rely on fairy tales to a greater extent than adults, and explains in part why a large quantity of memories and emotions are repressed and contained in fairy tales during childhood which are then later retrieved from the unconscious by the adult reader. Sellers and Phillips argue that the metaphorical bridge between past and present, created by memories triggered re-reading a certain tale, is what makes fairy tales additionally valuable to the adult audience. If fairy tales are considered valuable to the adult reader, then they should be considered invaluable to the adult writer, who by re-reading a fairy tale has access to a collection of intense childhood memories and emotions. In pastiching various fairy tales, including *La Belle et la Bête*, Amélie Nothomb is transported to her past and better able to delve into her childhood memories. Furthermore, Nothomb describes herself as having an intense relationship to writing: 'il n'y a plus aucune frontière entre le mot et la chose. En écrivant, j'ai totalement affaire à la réalité [...] Si je décris une scène violente, je vais éprouver cette violence, mais je vais l'éprouver avec une jouissance inimaginable.'<sup>215</sup> Not only does this quotation highlight the duality of pleasure and pain that will become increasingly apparent in Nothomb's work as this study progresses, but it also suggests that Nothomb, in adopting a child's perspective and narrative voice, is able to regress to a childlike state, writing using fairy tales to interpret the world around her as a child would, and to distance herself from painful emotions that resurface as she relives troublesome memories through the act of writing. The result is that the tale told in *Métaphysique des tubes*, as we shall discover, does not only contain references to fairy tales, but also takes on a fairy tale-like structure itself.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>215</sup> Entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', p. 566.

## Water symbolism in *Métaphysique des tubes*

If we consider how the child's mind functions, and if we recognise the notion that a polarized, animistic style and a 'streamlined'<sup>216</sup> plot is required by a child's fairy tale if it is to be beneficial to the younger audience, then one would expect the few details and embellishments found in *La Belle et la Bête* to be full of meaning: the lack of superfluous information found in a fairy tale means that any detail or information given plays a specific role in the story's development. This is a belief that Betsy Hearne seems to share when she uses the adjective 'telling' to describe the sparse detail found in Beaumont's story: 'Detail is limited to a few telling embellishments [...] Each magic object has a limited but vital role in the story.'<sup>217</sup> While she does not denote the specific meaning attached to water, she analyses one of its symbolic functions: 'The Beast is thirsting for love. Dying, he goes to water (and is often found pictured lying in it), but only Beauty can help him drink or, by sprinkling him with it, help him to renewed life.'<sup>218</sup> I would suggest that the theme is worth analysing in further detail, for it is one that is shared and developed by Amélie Nothomb in her work.

In *La Belle et la Bête* water features briefly at the end of the tale, as Beauty searches for the dying Beast once transported back to his palace:

Elle trouva la pauvre Bête étendue sans connaissance, et elle crut qu'elle était morte. Elle se jeta sur son corps, sans avoir horreur de sa figure; et sentant que son cœur battait encore, elle prit de l'eau dans le canal, et lui en jeta sur la tête (BB 42).

Although the major theme that arises in this quotation and runs throughout the tale is that of beastliness, which is to be discussed in detail in this chapter, an aquatic theme is also present: water revives the Beast without him drinking it but by being thrown upon his head. As Hearne suggests above, the act of showering the Beast with water is charged with symbolic meaning. According to

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<sup>216</sup> *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and revisions of an old tale*, p. 27.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

*Dictionnaire des symboles*,<sup>219</sup> water as a theme can be reduced to three main categories: 'source de vie, moyen de purification, centre de régénérescence.'<sup>220</sup> In Beaumont's tale, water appears to fulfil all three categories simultaneously. Firstly, and most evidently, it revives the Beast: 'La Bête ouvrit les yeux' (BB 42). Secondly, it could in sort symbolise his purification from beast to man, for it is Beauty who casts the water, bringing also the offer of marriage, which in turn leads to his metamorphosis into a prince, washing him clean of the evil fairy's spell: 'une méchante fée m'avait condamné à rester sous cette figure jusqu'à ce qu'une belle fille consentît à m'épouser, et elle m'avait défendu de faire paraître mon esprit' (BB 43). Finally, water is the centre for this regeneration, or rebirth, for the same reason that it signals his transformation by the love that is confirmed by Beauty's return. It also could be surmised that water regenerates the Beast because it quenches the metaphorical thirst for love, of which Hearne writes above. Water plays a similar role in *Métaphysique des tubes*, appearing regularly in various forms – be it rain, sea or drinking water. Yet it does become more complicated and paradoxical, suggesting that, if we are to compare the structure of Nothomb's novel to a fairy tale, the contemporary fairy tale has changed somewhat in form, not to mention length. This notion is not unheard of in the study of this genre, and will be considered at greater depth when looking at the theme of beastliness.

It is useful to consider Nothomb's attitudes to pleasure before considering the significance that water acquires in *Métaphysique des tubes*, given that water and pleasure will prove at times to be synonymous in the novel. 'Le plaisir éveille l'esprit et le pousse tant à la virtuosité qu'à la profondeur. C'est une si puissante magie qu'à défaut de volupté, l'idée de volupté suffit. Du moment qu'existe cette notion, l'être est sauvé' (MT 34): Nothomb believes that the magic pleasure brings saves and enriches humankind. As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, pleasure in the form of white chocolate also transforms

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<sup>219</sup> Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, eds, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, 10th edn (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont S.A. et Éditions Jupiter, 1989)

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 374.

the protagonist of *Métaphysique des tubes* from beast to baby. The magic contained in pleasure in Nothomb's novel is echoed in *La Belle et la Bête*, as the power and promise of pleasure found in companionship and love breaks the evil fairy's magical spell and saves the Beast. Although chocolate is one source of pleasure in Nothomb's writing, another is water, which becomes an important aspect of Nothomb's identity.

Water can be connected to Nothomb's identity on two main occasions: firstly, having formerly studied Japanese I am aware that 'ame' in Japanese translates as rain, which Nothomb indirectly confirms in *Métaphysique des tubes*: 'Ce n'était pas pour rien que mon prénom, en japonais, comportait la pluie' (MT 109). Secondly, compare the following quotations: 'le plaisir, c'est moi' (MT 31), 'la faim, c'est moi' (BF 19) and 'l'eau, c'était moi' (MT 109). If pleasure, hunger and water are interchangeable in the description of her identity, then we can assume that water is a great source of pleasure which she will be constantly hungry for. The link between Nothomb's identity and water begins to explain its omnipresence in Nothomb's novel and is illustrated with particular clarity when a rainstorm occurs as Nothomb is swimming in le Petit Lac Vert:

Je plongeais dans le lac et n'en sortais plus. Le moment le plus beau était l'adverse : je remontais alors à la surface pour faire la planche et recevoir la sublime douche perpendiculaire. [...] J'ouvrais la bouche pour avaler sa cascade, je ne refusais pas une goutte de ce qu'il avait à m'offrir (MT 109).

Water as a source of pleasure makes it beautiful: 'le plus beau' and 'sublime' used to describe the storm suggest this. 'La pluie, tiède et belle' (MT 99) with its beauty 'effarante' (MT 100) are two further, but by no means exhaustive, examples that support this notion. Furthermore, the protagonist's attempt to drink as much of the rainfall as possible is suggestive of her desire to embody pleasure. The pleasure that Nothomb attributes to the consumption of water becomes a recurrent theme in her writing, the strongest example of which can be seen in *Biographie de la faim* when Nothomb develops potomania: '[j]'appris une soif qui n'avait rien de métaphorique : quand j'avais un accès de potomanie,

je pouvais boire jusqu'à la fin des temps' (BF 47). She imagines the water talking to her, saying 'plus tu me boiras, plus grand sera ton désir de moi, et plus vif ton plaisir à l'assouvir (BF 48).

Nothomb's potomania, while illustrating her excessive and addictive need to satisfy her desire for pleasure, could also be indicative of a more sinister side to her identity. 'Dans mes livres et dans les inédits, parmi les choses que je n'ai pas publiés [*sic*] aussi, il y a des scènes très importantes qui ont lieu sous l'eau.'<sup>221</sup> As will be shown below, the scenes to which Nothomb is referring are often associated with danger and death as well as with beauty. Interestingly, while *Dictionnaire des symboles* begins by stating the aforementioned three major themes of life, purification and regeneration, it proceeds to discuss a dual nature of water symbolism, which was perhaps cast aside by Beaumont for its ambiguous element, atypical to the fairy tale.<sup>222</sup> 'l'eau est source de vie et source de mort, créatrice et destructrice.'<sup>223</sup> Amanieux describes the largest danger or fear found in Nothomb's work to be 'le néant'.<sup>224</sup> 'Le néant ressurgit dans les dangers de mort, quand Amélie risque de se noyer dans la mer, à Tottori, ou dans le bassin des carpes dont elle doit s'occuper',<sup>225</sup> Amanieux writes, leading towards two thought-provoking notions. The first begins to explain her insatiable hunger: by drinking as much as possible as well as snatching any pleasure she can, she could be seen to be attempting to conquer 'le néant'. Secondly, we are provided here with two examples where water does not clearly play a positive role: the suicide attempt that occurs in the carps' fishpond calls for the reader to consider the importance of the carps themselves, which will be analysed in detail later in this chapter, when focusing on the theme of Beastliness. In short, this breed of fish 'dégoute totalement la petite fille, et lui rappelle l'horreur de n'être qu'un corps vide'.<sup>226</sup> Considering that she thinks of herself as having a 'corps

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<sup>221</sup> Entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', p. 567.

<sup>222</sup> *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 9.

<sup>223</sup> *Dictionnaire des symboles*, p. 376.

<sup>224</sup> *L'éternelle affamée*, p. 32.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

amphibie' (*MT* 111) and describes her happy childhood as an 'enfance pluvieuse' which 's'épanouissait au Japon comme un poisson dans l'eau' (*MT* 110), we can comprehend how the ugliness and repulsion that she experiences with respect to the carps may have unsettled her: was she really similar to these beasts? The carps summon the subject of masculinity, repulsion towards womanhood and gender blur to be analysed as discussed, but it is interesting to note that water is also described as being both feminine and masculine. 'L'eau *descendante* et céleste, la Pluie, est une semence ouranienne qui vient féconder la terre ; masculine donc [...] D'autre part, l'eau *première*, l'eau *naissante* de la terre et de l'aube blanche, est féminine.'<sup>227</sup> We have already seen that Nothomb's first name incorporates rain, the masculine element of water, and this further adds to the gender blur linked to the carps.

The near drowning of the protagonist that Amanieux mentions above is analysed by Mark Lee in a more optimistic light. He describes the event at Tottori as being 'un moment décisif dans l'évolution de l'identité autobiographique nothombienne',<sup>228</sup> primarily because it reveals Nothomb's French linguistic capacities to her family. Rather than conversing purely in Japanese with Nishio-san, she can now allow herself to communicate with her biological family. Secondly it reveals the brutal temperament of the Japanese, a people that Nothomb formerly idolised and chose to become one of (*MT* 56), as those around idly watch her drown. Lee alerts us to a pattern that emerges in Nothomb's novel with several near drownings, both literal and metaphorical. Michel David and Lee note an event in the novel that for Nothomb's father almost results in death. The young protagonist believes that her father works in the sewers after he falls into one during a walk in the floodwater. David believes that this 'discovery' strengthens Amélie Nothomb's fascination with water:<sup>229</sup>

'j'étais contente que mon père fasse un travail en rapport avec l'eau – car, pour être de l'eau sale, ce n'en était pas moins de l'eau, mon élément ami, celui qui

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<sup>227</sup> *Dictionnaire des symboles*, p. 379.

<sup>228</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 174.

<sup>229</sup> *Le symptôme graphomane*, p. 58.

me ressemblait le plus, celui dans lequel je me sentais le mieux' (MT 105). This account is retold with humour and a childlike perception that mutes any sensation of danger when reading the text, adding another facet to the significance of the fusion between pleasure and pain. It is the predominance of imagery and vocabulary relating to water and drowning that proves its significance: Lee states an exhaustive list of examples, of which the following is highly significant: 'l'événement le plus traumatique du roman emprunte un vocabulaire apparenté à la noyade.'<sup>230</sup> This quotation refers to the moment when Nothomb discovers she is to leave Japan and Nishio-san. 'J'étais dans la mer, j'avais perdu pied, l'eau m'avalait' (MT 123). This imagery mimics the unfolding of her first literal near drowning, confirming a fear of death, of 'le néant',<sup>231</sup> of losing beauty and pleasure and with this encouraging the conflicting emotions that arise from these. Water is beauty, pleasure, life and identity while also representative of a beastly hunger, pain and fear. It is for this reason that I emphasise its symbolism: water echoes the rich and varied main themes of both *La Belle et la Bête* and *Métaphysique des tubes*: beauty and beastliness, in all their fused guises.

### Beauty and beastliness

Beauty and beastliness becomes almost synonymous in *Métaphysique des tubes*, yet analysing both sides simultaneously as if one theme would be confusing and unstructured. It is for this reason that I have chosen to separate beauty and beastliness initially as far as possible, explaining how Nothomb alters the stereotypical and traditional expectations of the two themes in her novels as the study progresses. The following themes will fall into the section on beauty: echoes between Belle and Nishio-san, physical attractiveness and worldly beauty. For ugliness I will focus on Bête's character, masculinity and physical ugliness, including the status of obesity in Nothomb's writing. We shall see that in the

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<sup>230</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 177.

<sup>231</sup> *L'éternelle affamée*, p. 32.



traditional fairy tale, the character Beauty appears to incarnate beauty, just as the character Beast appears to incarnate beastliness. However, the secret of the traditional tale is that both Beauty and the Beast are Beauties, and it is the evil sisters who are inherently beastly. In Nothomb's contemporary slant, Beauty, Kashima-san, is the Beast, and the Beast, Nishio-san, is Beauty. Translating back to traditional realities, Nishio-san is Beauty and Beast combined as both are considered Beauties by the traditional tale's end, and Kashima-san is the Beast, despite being beautiful, as are the evil sisters in Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête*.

'Beauty may be especially attractive, but after the opening pages her looks are not mentioned. Instead, her virtues are stressed.'<sup>232</sup> As Griswold argues, it becomes apparent that it is Belle's character that really justifies her name, and not her physical attractiveness. She is humble and hardworking, especially after her father loses his fortune and the family move to the countryside: 'La Belle se levait à quatre heures du matin, et se dépêchait de nettoyer la maison, d'apprêter à dîner pour la famille' (BB 25). Unlike her appearance, her beautiful virtues are repeatedly stressed, implying their greater importance: 'Il admirait la vertu de cette jeune fille, et surtout sa patience' (BB 25), 'les vertus de cette cadette leur avaient inspiré beaucoup de jalousie' (BB 31) are two further examples of this. Unsurprisingly, Belle's loving nature leads her to perform loving acts, and her self-sacrifice for her father is exemplary of this. 'Puisque le monstre veut bien accepter une de ses filles, je veux me livrer à toute sa furie, et je me trouve fort heureuse, puisqu'en mourant j'aurai la joie de sauver mon père et de lui prouver ma tendresse' (BB 30). Not only does she insist on dying to save her father, but she does so with dignity to lessen the pain for him: 'il n'y avait que la Belle qui ne pleurait point, parce qu'elle ne voulait pas augmenter leur douleur' (BB 32). This importance given to good behaviour and character is traditional to fairy tales, which 'depict roles and behaviour patterns considered socially

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<sup>232</sup> Jerry Griswold, *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast": A Handbook* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 41.

appropriate for each gender and each age group'<sup>233</sup> and falls into one of the rules outlined by Zipes in reference to the structure of a fairy tale for children: 'the fairy tale must be didactic and teach a lesson that corroborates the code of civility as it was being developed at that time.'<sup>234</sup> Nothomb creates her own Belle in *Métaphysique des tubes*, but it is not necessarily the young protagonist as we might expect: the role is filled by Nishio-san. However, her lacking physical beauty ('elle n'était pas jolie' (MT 52)) causes a blurring to take place, meaning that it could be interpreted that she is at once fulfilling the traditional role of Belle while simultaneously acting as a loving Beast: Catherine Rodgers writes that of all the versions of *La Belle et la Bête*, 'none of them [...] develops the dichotomous view presented by Nothomb in her tale of a wicked Beauty and a kindly Beast.'<sup>235</sup> Here she is referring to Nothomb's *Attentat*, but her statement can be applied to *Métaphysique des tubes* when considering the roles of Nishio-san and Kashima-san. Nishio-san's description could be interpreted as similar to a gentle beast: she is not physically beautiful, but beauty is intrinsic to her nature: 'Nishio-san était jeune, douce et gentille' (MT 52). However, because her internal qualities are made clear from the start by the fondness that Nothomb shows towards her, as is not the case with *la Bête*, I maintain that beneath Nothomb's boundary blurring Nishio-san is at heart the traditional Belle: 'Vivait avec nous Nishio-san, ma gouvernante japonaise. Elle était la bonté même et me dorlotait pendant des heures' (MT 42). Nothomb treats and loves Nishio-san as she would a mother, bonding with her and choosing her Japanese language above French. This aspect is interesting when we consider that Belle also fulfils the maternal role, given that there is a distinct lack of a mother in the tale. This idea of motherhood is strengthened towards the end of the book, as Nothomb learns of her family's departure from Japan: ' - Nishio-san doit rester avec moi! Nishio-san doit rester avec moi!' (MT 122). The repetition of the same sentence heightens the sense of Nothomb's desperation to stay with Nishio-san. Amanieux also

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<sup>233</sup> *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, p. 20.

<sup>234</sup> 'The Origins of the Fairy Tale for Children or, How Script Was Used to Tame the Beast in Us', p. 133.

<sup>235</sup> 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 56.

notes this relationship between them, quoting Nothomb from an interview, saying 'Nishio-san était ma mère autant que ma mère'.<sup>236</sup> It is also worth noting that it is Nishio-san, rather than her mother, who saves the protagonist from death after her suicide attempt in the carps' pond: 'Je suis en vie. Les yeux me sont rendus. Je vois que c'est Nishio-san qui m'a tirée de l'eau' (*MT* 153). This quotation also underlines the aquatic theme studied previously, emphasising the duality of water: it represents danger and death as the young protagonist begins to drown, but also purification as Nothomb tries to purge herself clean of the haunting image of the carps and of all the fears that they evoke, which will be studied in depth shortly. Furthermore, the positive character of Nishio-san saves her from her fate, and connects death with life.

Nishio-san also somewhat sacrifices herself for Amélie, as Belle does for her father. We are made aware in *Stupeur et tremblements*,<sup>237</sup> another autobiographically based story recounting a year spent in a Japanese company, that losing face is a cardinal Japanese sin:

Me donner ce poste, de la part de ma supérieure, était une façon de me forcer à rendre mon tablier. Or, démissionner, c'était perdre la face. Nettoyer les chiottes, aux yeux d'un Japonais, ce n'était pas honorable, mais ce n'était pas perdre la face (*ST* 133).

By defending the Nothomb family, Nishio-san loses face in the eyes of Kashima-san, the second governess and housekeeper. 'La femme belge te parle comme à une subalterne' (*MT* 118), 'Tu es bien naïve si tu ne vois pas le mépris qui se cache derrière leur sourire' (*MT* 120), 'Si tu veux faire partie d'une famille de chiens, tant mieux pour toi' (*MT* 121) are some of the insults that Kashima-san aims at Nishio-san. Furthermore, Kashima-san refers above to the Nothomb family as 'une famille de chiens' which reintroduces and supports the idea found in the first chapter of this thesis that Nothomb's novels are permeated by various

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<sup>236</sup> *L'éternelle affamée*, p. 38.

<sup>237</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Stupeur et tremblements* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1999; Livre de poche, 1999): all subsequent references to the text will appear as *ST* followed by the page number.

types of beasts, including the canine species.<sup>238</sup> Kashima-san provides one particular insult that is far more telling of her own nature than of Nishio-san's: 'Tu es trop bête' (MT 121). This insult could also be intended as a potential pun by Nothomb, emphasising the prevalence of beasts in her writing. This is one example of how Beauty and Beastliness also permeates Nothomb's vocabulary; a topic on which I shall shortly focus. Nishio-san and Kashima-san exist in contradistinction to one another and Amanieux recognises this by comparing the two characters, quoting Nothomb once again as confirmation that Kashima-san plays the role of 'mauvaise mère'<sup>239</sup> as underlined by Laureline Amanieux, or a wicked beauty. Nothomb also acknowledges their vital differences, writing 'Elle [Kashima-san] était le contraire de la première [Nishio-san]' (MT 52).

Nishio-san may well be a version of Belle, made clear by her similar nature and positive maternal role, but this does not mean that Kashima-san, as her opposite, represents the Beast: she represents instead Belle's evil sisters. As Bettelheim points out, 'there is nothing so beastly in the fairy tale of "Beauty and the Beast."'<sup>240</sup> The revelation of the fairy tale is that the Beast is not really a beast; the role is fulfilled by other characters, the real beasts, Belle's sisters. Griswold notes that 'Beauty's sisters are hypercritical';<sup>241</sup> a trait exemplified above in Kashima-san. Belle's sisters are still described as beautiful - 'ses filles étaient très belles' (BB 23) – but comparatively their beauty is lesser than Belle's, perhaps for the reason that Hearne gives in writing 'Beauty is the standard female protagonist, her inner goodness manifested by outward appearance':<sup>242</sup> Belle's sisters are lacking internal beauty, and thus their outward appearance cannot be greater than Belle's. Kashima-san is also described as beautiful, 'd'une beauté aussi aristocratique que ses origines', with a 'magnifique visage' and 'ses

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<sup>238</sup> pp. 46-7 of this thesis discuss various types of beast found in Nothomb's novels. Characters are occasionally associated to the canine species, either directly ('un chiot doberman' (MT 26)) or indirectly, when canine qualities, such as howling or barking, are attributed to Nothombian characters ('bêtes braillardes' (MT 23-4)).

<sup>239</sup> *L'éternelle affamée*, p. 38

<sup>240</sup> *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 303.

<sup>241</sup> *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast"*, p. 44.

<sup>242</sup> *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and revisions of an old tale*, p. 26.

traits d'une finesse parfaite et sa maigreur hautaine' (MT all 53). Yet this beauty does not make her loveable, as is also the case with Belle's sisters. At the end of the fairy tale, the good fairy turns the evil sisters to stone, 'Devenez deux statues; mais conservez toute votre raison sous la pierre qui vous enveloppera. Vous demeurez à la porte du palais de votre sœur et je ne vous impose point d'autre peine que d'être témoins de son bonheur' (BB 44). 'It is jealousy', Warner writes, 'that drives these two sets of wicked ladies to their fate [...] Beauty's sisters suffer vanity and sarcasm.'<sup>243</sup> Kashima-san does not receive such a just punishment for her cruel heart, but her beauty does not hide that she is the true beast in the story, just as the sisters are in *La Belle et la Bête*. Here Nothomb distances herself from traditional fairy tale and moves towards contemporary versions: we learnt earlier that happy endings are vital in fairy tales, in order to provide hope to children and teach them what is right, but Kashima-san remains untouched, able to continue her life unaltered. Warner analyses the work of Angela Carter, a writer who revisited the themes found in *La Belle et la Bête* on several occasions, recreating endings that are far from the original version. She writes that Carter turns the story 'inside out and upside down; in a spirit of mischief'.<sup>244</sup> Griswold agrees with Warner, stating 'Carter then turns Beaumont's story on its head'.<sup>245</sup> While Nothomb does not go to such extremes, she does blur and expand the boundaries between beauty and ugliness, more so than is found in the original story itself, but I would suggest that Nothomb manipulates what is already apparent in the tale's foundations. Considering again Catherine Rodgers' view that Nothomb's dichotomous view of 'a wicked Beauty and a kindly Beast'<sup>246</sup> is idiosyncratic to her work, we can see that this may not be entirely true: Beaumont's version has a clear division between internal and external beauty and beastliness: you can be externally beautiful and yet internally hideous, for example. The 'wicked beauty' may not be the main

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<sup>243</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd.; Random House, 1994), p. 18.

<sup>244</sup> *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 308.

<sup>245</sup> *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast"*, p. 183.

<sup>246</sup> 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 56.

protagonist in Beaumont's tale, but the character can be found in *La Belle et la Bête* with the beautiful yet evil sisters. Furthermore, the 'kindly beast' of which Rodgers talks appears to be fulfilled by the character of la Bête, who is the most paradoxical figure in the tale as we shall soon discover: as Griswold notes, 'essentially, the Beast in Beaumont's tale is paradoxical.'<sup>247</sup> In fact, I would suggest that it is the contemporary usage of the Beast's already paradoxical traditional character that makes the theme of Beauty and Beastliness at times blurred and purposely confusing in Nothomb's work. In Beaumont's tale, 'the great lesson', as Bettelheim notes, is that 'a thing must be loved *before* it is loveable',<sup>248</sup> and attractiveness or ugliness play no vital part. This lesson is learnt by looking at the Beast, and it would seem that Nothomb turns to and moulds him in order to manipulate and obliterate, to a greater extent than Beaumont, the perceived idea that physical appeal makes you attractive in all senses of the world. A study of the Beast will better explain this.

Traditionally, the Beast is initially perceived, unsurprisingly, to be a 'vilain monstre' (BB 29). While it is true that 'the Beast in Beaumont's tale is only thinly sketched',<sup>249</sup> we can infer his appearance by the reactions of the other characters. For example, as the father picks a rose from the Beast's garden, 'il entendit un grand bruit, et vit venir à lui une bête si horrible, qu'il fut tout près de s'évanouir' (BB 28). The Beast appears so powerful that the father throws himself to his knees and accepts his fate of death, returning to the palace instead of breaking his promise: 'la puissance de cette Bête est si grande qu'il ne me reste aucune espérance de la faire périr' (BB 31). Beauty reacts similarly, 'la Belle ne put s'empêcher de frémir en voyant cette horrible figure' (BB 32), believing he will eat her. Griswold states that the notion of the Beast's power is the first way in which he is paradoxical:<sup>250</sup> 'On the one hand, he is horrific and frightens the Merchant and Beauty, and they cower at his appearance. On the other hand, this

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<sup>247</sup> *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast"*, p. 45.

<sup>248</sup> *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 64.

<sup>249</sup> *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast"*, p. 45.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

scary creature is also pitiable and in need of petting.’<sup>251</sup> Perhaps the fact that he has moments of kindness and weakness is the first sign of the Beast’s incongruent form. Indeed, it is worth noting that the father mistakes his kindness initially with that of a good fairy’s: ‘[a]ssurément, dit-il en lui-même, ce palais appartient à quelque bonne fée, qui a eu pitié de ma situation [...] Je vous remercie, madame la Fée, d’avoir eu la bonté de penser à mon déjeuner’ (BB 28). The Beast looks after the father, providing him with accommodation and food. Likewise, rather than being eaten, Belle is provided with a luxurious room, ‘elle fut éblouie de la magnificence’ (BB 35), treated as ‘la reine et la maîtresse’ of the palace (BB 35), and allowed a week of freedom to see her father. This is a further example of the power paradox, as the Beast condemns the father to death were he not to produce a daughter to live with him, while, as Griswold writes, ‘he is a courtly pussycat who surrenders the reins of power to the woman he puts on a pedestal.’<sup>252</sup> The Beast is, after all, a deformed handsome prince, and it is perhaps his final transformation that provides Nothomb with her fuel: why must he turn into a handsome prince, if he is internally beautiful? Is Beaumont not in fact implying that you must be attractive internally and externally? ‘Fairy tales often attack perceived ideas’, Warner writes, ‘monsters turn out to be handsome young princes, beggars princesses, ugly old woman powerful and benevolent fairies.’<sup>253</sup> It is true that Beaumont pushes some perceptions in allowing Beauty to love a Beast before he is transformed as well as shocking the reader by revealing his true appearance, but his metamorphosis almost voids the moral and clichés ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’, ‘it is what is on the inside that counts’. Consequentially, and as the study below endeavours to illustrate, Nothomb splinters the role of the Beast. However, while she does blur internal and external qualities, all the while refraining from any magical transformations that transform beast to beauty and reduce the moral message of *La Belle et la Bête*, she also manipulates the two key themes of beauty and ugliness in a

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 415.

different way: by the sheer expanse of textual encounters with the subject. The text is punctuated with references to beauty, the next subject of my analysis, shaping nearly every page in some way.

‘Le monde était beau: vivre en valait la peine’ (MT 70) Nothomb writes, notifying the reader to the vital importance placed on beauty. It is not surprising, then, that beauty is omnipresent in Nothomb’s work. Often, given that living in Japan meant ‘vivre au cœur de la beauté’ (MT 57), lexis associated with beauty is found with a description of nature, as seen previously when analysing water. ‘Chaque jour, le jardin était plus luxuriant que la veille. Une fleur ne se fanait que pour renaître plus belle’ (MT 60), ‘la lumière du soleil n’avait jamais été aussi belle’ (MT 69) and ‘l’endroit était aussi très beau’ (MT 95) are three further supporting quotations to this point. But the lexis of beauty is not confined to nature, it can also be used in untraditional phrases: ‘il hurlait de plus belle et de plus laid’ (MT 26) is one example of this, as is the choice to call Nishio-san’s stories beautiful given the morbid content, where ‘les corps y finissaient toujours en morceaux’ (MT 52). Moreover, we have seen that beauty qualifies personal appearance: Rodgers believes that it is especially in physical descriptions of other characters that beauty takes on obsessive levels.<sup>254</sup> Lénaïk Le Garrec supports Rodgers’ view, adding that ‘in *Métaphysique des tubes* the female narrator is the beauty’.<sup>255</sup> ‘Puis elle suivait d’un doigt délicat le dessin de mes traits et en vantait la beauté qu’elle disait extrême : elle s’exaltait de ma bouche, de mon front, de mes joues, de mes yeux, et concluait qu’elle n’avait jamais vu une déesse au visage aussi admirable’ (MT 58). While I agree that the protagonist is described in a hyperbolic style indirectly by Nishio-san and fits the traditional image of Belle, I still maintain that it is Nishio-san herself that best fits the traditional personality for her, despite being a contemporary version of the ‘gentle beast’. However, it is important to note that Nothomb often cannot settle for something averagely beautiful in other contexts – it has to be superlative: she describes playing with a spinning top as ‘jouer au plus beau jeu du monde’ (MT 47-8). Additionally, in her

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<sup>254</sup> ‘Nothomb’s Anorexic Beauties’, p. 50.

<sup>255</sup> ‘Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts’, p. 64.



quest to tame Kashima-san, which she incidentally does not manage, she picks 'le plus beau camélia' and performs 'le plus beau spectacle' (*MT* both 63). This lexical choice is very telling of Nothomb's identity, as it shows her constant need for beauty in large proportions, echoing the analysis seen when considering the meaning of water symbolism.

There are very few circumstances in the novel where beauty turns into something fundamentally negative, as it is with Kashima-san. Another example is found in the description of nature, so often described pleasurably and with reference to hyperbolic beauty. 'Les arbres sont si chevelus que leur calvitie prochaine est inimaginable. Les verdure sont plus plantureuses que jamais, les parterres prospèrent, cela sent l'âge d'or [...] La nature en faisait trop : cela cachait quelque chose' (*MT* 142). Normally Nothomb cannot satisfy her need for beauty, and here we have a passage where beauty becomes too much, ugly even, as summer approaches and oversaturates the landscape. One explanation for this change in mentality is due to a drop in the protagonist's mood – she has been haunted by carps, Kashima-san and the news of the family's departure from Japan, and thus Nishio-san. While waiting to die, she thinks tellingly, 'je suis heureuse de savoir que je n'irai plus jamais nourrir les carpes et que je ne quitterai jamais le Japon' (*MT* 149). Instead of capturing as much pleasure and beauty as possible, this plummet in mood causes her to reject both and in turn reject life, as pleasure, beauty and life are closely connected as emphasised in the earlier analysis of water symbolism. This drop in mood which provokes the protagonist to try and take her own life can perhaps be understood by the possible metaphorical value of the oversaturated descriptions of summer noted above: Pries states that '[t]he passage of spring to summer is [...] a foreshadowing of the passage of childhood to adulthood, or puberty'.<sup>256</sup> The young girl's realisation that childhood is not everlasting causes her to desperately try and halt the progression of time and remain a child eternally in death; an idea to which we shall return when studying the similarities between

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<sup>256</sup> Désirée Pries, 'Piscina' in *Amélie Nothomb*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 24-35 (p. 29).

*Métaphysique des tubes* and *Peter Pan*. At this point it will become increasingly apparent that the denial of pleasure and rejection of life seen in *Métaphysique des tubes* is mimicked intertextually in *Biographie de la faim* when Nothomb and her sister Juliette develop anorexia nervosa ('je cesserai de manger' (BF 165)). This echo strengthens the theory that this denial stems from a rejection of womanhood, the metaphorical summer of our lives, to retain a childlike image of purity.

### Nothomb's beastly carps: obesity and gender blur

It is perhaps the image of the carps that produces the most repulsion and ugliness for Nothomb. They are described as monstrous beasts, not just due to their character, but also to their outward appearance: they are obese: 'leur épaisse silhouette de poissons divas, de prêtresses surnourries [...] elles ressemblaient à des Castafiore muettes, obèses et vêtues de fourreaux chatoyants' (MT 84). Nothomb is repulsed by these aquatic creatures, which she directly labels as beasts (MT 86) in the text, in part because of their obese appearance. Nothomb's former attitude to overindulgence and obesity based on her adolescent experiences with anorexia nervosa and recovery from the illness clarify why obese characters may be described as beastly in her novels:

Manger, c'était le diable, c'était le mal. Et forcément une personne grosse était une personne qui était très entourée par le mal parce qu'elle avait beaucoup mangé. Donc l'obèse était pour moi une personne diabolique, maléfique.<sup>257</sup>

Obesity creates beasts in Nothomb's writing and is perceived by fictional characters as monstrous and frightening not only in *Métaphysique des tubes*, but also in *Hygiène de l'assassin*. Prétextat Tach is an obese character described with beast-like associations, especially in a description found towards the beginning of Nothomb's novel: '[i]l est 10 heures du matin, monsieur, je n'allume pas la lumière à cette-heure là. Du reste, vous me verrez bien assez tôt, dès que vos

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<sup>257</sup> 'Entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', p. 564.

yeux se seront habitués à l'obscurité' (HA 10). Prétextat Tach's accommodation echoes 'l'antre du monstre' (MT 28) referred to above in *Métaphysique des tubes*, as he lives in the dark and in isolation due to his hideous appearance ('si j'étais beau, je ne vivrais pas reclus ici' (HA 16)). One journalist remarks, still suffering from his encounter with Tach, '[j]e vous assure, tout y était! L'obscurité, la laideur, la peur, la claustrophobie...' (HA 24). While supporting the above comparison of Tach's living conditions to that of a monster or a beast, it also suggests that his personality is beastly; a point which resurfaces constantly in the novel. For example, Tach makes another journalist vomit after enduring the description of his repulsive daily rituals: 'le teint livide du journaliste vira au vert: il décampa en courant, plié en deux, la main sur la bouche [...] il [Tach] avait donc enregistré le bruit du vomissement' (HA 38). His conversation with Nina also causes her disgust and makes her feel nauseous: 'taisez-vous, vous me donnez envie de vomir' (HA 174). His physical appearance is described at several points in the tale, but its beastly impact is perhaps most pertinently emphasised indirectly when stating how he feels about his own appearance: '[j]e n'en souffre pas. La souffrance est pour les autres, pour ceux qui me voient. [...] Je ne me regarde jamais dans les miroirs' (HA 18). His belief that he is unbearable to look at, that others cower and suffer at his appearance, resonates in descriptions commonly found when characters witness the appearance of a beast. For example, in *La Belle et la Bête*, Belle's father's first encounter with the Beast is comparable to traditional descriptions: 'il entendit un grand bruit, et vit venir à lui une bête si horrible, qu'il fut tout près de s'évanouir' (BB 28). Furthermore, while in *Hygiène de l'assassin* Tach's accommodation, appearance, personality and past acts are all described at various points to be beastly, the novel repeatedly refers to Tach as 'l'obèse'. 'La vie de l'obèse' (HA 12), 'l'obèse murmura' (HA 38), 'demanda l'obèse' (HA 103) and 'l'obèse fixa la journaliste' (HA 152): these are a few, but by no means extensive, examples of this. This repetitive technique of naming Tach 'l'obèse' suggests that obesity defines Tach more than other aspects of his identity and almost implies 'beast' as being

synonymous to 'obese' in the book, as the latter explains why he lives alone and causes suffering to those who look at him, as well as being the motor behind his repulsive eating habits, which revolt others to the point of vomiting.

Another Nothombian character who incarnates the obese model of the beast is Mr. Omochi in *Stupeur et tremblements*. Mr. Omochi is 'énorme et effrayant' (ST 9) and is referred to as obese at several points in the text in the same defining manner as Tach in *Hygiène de l'assassin*: 'hurle l'obèse' (ST 47), 'les hurlements de l'obèse' (ST 18), 'le vice-président était un obese colérique' (ST 118) [all my emphasis]. He also has the same terrifying anger found in the traditional image of the beast that has been noted as existing in the baby of *Métaphysique des tubes*. 'La colère s'emparait de lui et il se mettait à hurler sa rage' (MT 25), is comparable to the three examples emphasised above where Mr. Omochi is directly called obese, showing that 'hurler' is a verb which begins to illustrate this beastly anger. Furthermore, Mr. Omochi is referred to in the text as another traditionally ugly and imposing creature: 'l'ogre [...] se moucha, ce qui est au Japon l'un des combles de la grossièreté' (ST 181). This quotation illustrates the revolting nature of the beast which has also been highlighted in Pretextat Tach. Moreover, Narjoux illustrates how Nothomb's characters' physical appearance often reflects their personality and nature, suggesting that obese characters are fundamentally beastly: 'à l'exact opposé de "Dieu" sur l'échelle du Bien et du Mal, comme sur l'échelle du Beau et du Laid, se trouve M. Omochi.'<sup>258</sup> It is unsurprising that Mr. Omochi is likened to the Devil, considering that Nothomb once viewed obesity as having the power to make someone 'diabolique, maléfique':<sup>259</sup> 'Dieu était le président et le vice-président était le Diable' (ST 92).

Obesity can be clearly linked to beastliness in *Métaphysique des tubes* as it in Nothomb's other novels. However, further analysis of the carps will allow us to understand that while obesity plays a key role in their significance, it is

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<sup>258</sup> Cécile Narjoux, *Étude sur Stupeur et tremblements* (Paris: Ellipses, 2004), p. 27.

<sup>259</sup> 'L'entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', p. 564.

undeniable that it does not explain the full extent of their beastly presence in *Métaphysique des tubes*. Nothomb is first told about carps when a paper model of one is put up in the garden. 'On m'expliqua que c'était une carpe, en l'honneur de mai, mois des garçons' (MT 81). *Dictionnaire des symboles* writes that this fish also symbolises courage and perseverance, given that it goes against the current in the water, as well as 'la suprématie intellectuelle'.<sup>260</sup> She wonders how the masculine sex is superior to its female counterpart but she is unable to make any positive suggestions and concludes 'les Japonais avaient eu raison de choisir cette bête pour emblème du sexe moche' (MT 86). Yet, curiously, Nothomb describes the carps using female associations, introducing an element of gender blur: 'leur épaisse silhouette de poissons **divas**, de prêtresses surnourries [...] elles ressemblaient à des **Castafiore** muettes, obèses et vêtues de **fourreaux chatoyants** [my emphasis]' (MT 84). Pries provides a potential explanation for this choice made by Nothomb: 'Young Amélie discovers herself in the mirror of the ever-hungry, never-satisfied mouths of carps, whose bodies are reduced to a digestive tube which eats, processes, expels waste, and asks for more'.<sup>261</sup> Seeing herself in the carp, Nothomb is repulsed, hinting that she is disgusted not only by the male race, but also in part by females, if only mature and fat ones. 'Seules nos repulsions parlent vraiment de nous' (MT 137) Nothomb writes, supporting this idea, suggesting that perhaps her later suicide attempt will not be solely as a result of the idea of leaving Japan and the torment experienced by nurturing the carps, but also a revolt against her impending departure from childhood. It seems that Nothomb's sense that carps are ugly, fat and symbolise the decline of childhood may complement the descriptive passage from spring to summer that foreshadows Nothomb's anorexia in her rejection of the maturing female body. Catherine Rodgers writes that 'the carps are utterly abject' and that 'even without the nightmare, the sexual connotations are manifest'.<sup>262</sup> Pries expands on this, and goes as far as to suggest that the carps

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<sup>260</sup> *Dictionnaire des symboles*, p. 164.

<sup>261</sup> 'Piscina', p. 29.

<sup>262</sup> 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 58.

are at once male and female for different reasons: 'young Amélie contrasts the outward physical realities of the male and female body [...] Female sex organs are neatly tucked away, hidden inside, while the male sex organs are external, readily exposed.'<sup>263</sup> She believes that the fish appear externally masculine, while their mouths are 'nearly a *vagina dentate*'.<sup>264</sup> The relevance of these two views becomes more apparent in connection to a statement Nothomb makes near the end of the novel as she waits to drown: 'Bientôt, le corps ne sera plus que tuyau. Il se laissera envahir par l'élément adoré qui donne la mort. Enfin désencombrée de ses fonctions inutiles, la canalisation livrera passage à l'eau – à plus rien d'autre' (MT 152). Nothomb wants to rid her memory of the carps, which tainted her self-image of 'Dieu le tube': 'le diamètre de leur orifice était presque égal au diamètre de leur corps, ce qui eût évoqué la section d'un tuyau' (MT 136). She rejects femininity, and purges herself of all gender, aiming in sort to become asexual, which, as Rodgers states, is 'an idealized version of an anorexic self'.<sup>265</sup> This may seem unusual, since in Nothomb's work 'beauty seems to be an exclusively feminine domaine',<sup>266</sup> given that no male or masculine symbol is accorded the honour of being physically attractive. Yet, the image of the carps overpowers this desire for feminine beauty, proving how strongly they have affected her.

The carps are a true symbol of torment in the novel; each encounter with them provides a similar beastly and disgusted description similar to Nothomb's initial one: 'ces sales bêtes de carpes qui venaient alors à la surface, gueules ouvertes, pour prendre leur casse-croûte' (MT 134). So repulsed by their image, she learns to feed them with her eyes closed, as a 'question de survie' (MT 136). Moreover, Amélie is so determined not to see herself in the carp that her mother's idea to name them after her three children is described as a 'désastre onomastique' (MT 134), which results in Nothomb quickly naming them 'Jésus, Marie et Joseph' (MT 135). While this may initially seem random and comical, it

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<sup>263</sup> 'Piscina', p. 27.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>265</sup> 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 59.

<sup>266</sup> 'Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts', p. 67.

becomes far more pertinent that it may be thought possible: writing using religious terminology, Nothomb declares when feeding the carps, ‘ – Ceci est mon corps livré pour vous’ (MT 135). She becomes so certain that it is her body nourishing the beastly fish, that the fish are somehow eating her, that she stops eating: ‘Ces bouches en forme de bouées qui bouffaient ma bouffe avant de me bouffer moi!’ (MT 136). This idea that the carps, as beasts, will eat her is one seen with Belle in *La Belle et la Bête*: ‘La Bête veut m’engraisser avant de me manger, puisqu’elle me fait si bonne chère’ (BB 32). The thought of being eaten is repeated in the story, ‘elle croyait fermement que la Bête la mangerait le soir’ (BB 33), which strengthens the perceived idea that the monster has a character true to his name. The difference in *Métaphysique des tubes* is that the horrible fish undergo no such magical transformation as the Beast does in *La Belle et la Bête*. The reason for this is the already stated notion that the Beast was never really a true beast, and by the tale’s end all fears associated with the Beast are put to rest even before his metamorphosis. The carp are never seen in a different light; their impact is so strong that she has nightmares about them: ‘Mes mains longeaient mon corps, guettant d’hallucinantes métamorphoses’ (MT 139). In this way the carps could be seen to be another ‘real’ Beast, as well as traditionally ‘perceived’ one, but I would suggest that the carp fulfil a different character: that of the elusive bad fairy, who in *La Belle et la Bête* transforms the young handsome prince into the Beast (BB 43). Nothomb describes ‘hallucinantes métamorphoses’ when she thinks of the three fish, which make her fear that she will become what she despises for no apparent reason, just as the bad fairy in *La Belle et la Bête* does not provide one for her actions. My theory would imply that the young protagonist is at once Beauty and the Beast, afraid of being eaten by the Beast and of becoming one. This notion is plausible, given that at the tale’s end Beauty and the Beast are both ‘Beauties’, echoes of one another differing merely in gender. Nothomb is at once a child, glorious and free, as well as a Beast, trapped by her need to consume beauty and by her vision of herself in the carps. The theory also adds to the theme of gender

blurring, to be discussed in detail when considering *Peter Pan*, given that not only do the parents offer her a birthday present which symbolises masculinity, but she also sees herself in this symbol. Interestingly, the carps remain both internally and externally repulsive, which is something that does not occur in *La Belle et la Bête*: as we have noted, the ugliest characters, the evil sisters, are externally beautiful.

The modern day interpretation of *La Belle et la Bête* is multifaceted and playful. 'The attraction of the wild, and of the wild brother in twentieth-century culture, cannot be overestimated', Warner writes, continuing, 'as the century advances, in the cascade of deliberate revisions of the tale, Beauty stands in need of the Beast, rather than vice versa, and the Beast's beastliness is good, even adorable.'<sup>267</sup> For Nothomb, who writes 'je savais que les choses les plus séduisantes étaient forcément les plus dangereuses' (MT 105), the Beast splinters and forms many faces, two of which are in accordance with Warner's statement: the face of a seductive Beauty with a beastly heart, Kashima-san, whom Nothomb tries to tame and seduce but cannot, and also the face of Nothomb's self-destructive hunt for pleasure and beauty. Yet I have described Kashima-san to be representative of the evil sisters in Beaumont's tale, and I maintain this belief: the confusion arises because contemporary versions of the Beast alter the traditional character: traditionally we have seen that the Beast is not beastly, and is 'as beautiful a person as Beauty'.<sup>268</sup> As Griswold notes 'the sisters' duplicity corresponds with the Beast's doubleness since his ugliness covers his virtuous nature'.<sup>269</sup> Duplicity is a theme found in Beaumont's traditional tale, but contemporary alternatives have taken this duplicity and blurred it, merging the traditional role of the nasty sisters and with that of the Beast. As a result, his heart and nature also become evil where previously they were not. Yet Nothomb does not rid duplicity from her work, and as she frees beauty and beastliness from the confines of character, casting them into the text

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<sup>267</sup> *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 307.

<sup>268</sup> *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 305.

<sup>269</sup> *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast"*, p. 45.



without holding back, we can see the results. Firstly, there are multiple Beauties and multiple Beasts, both blurring mixtures of internal and external beauty and ugliness. Secondly, and relating to this, Beauty becomes masochistic as duality is taken to new extremes. The theme of Dionysian extremes, visible in the above study especially when considering Nothomb's identity in the study of water symbolism, without being explicitly explained forms a large part of the next chapter, as the battle between childhood and puberty grows stronger. Yet the result of these extremes of duality plays a fundamentally different role in this chapter from that in the next: the reader is never quite sure if a character translates back to a traditional Beauty or a traditional Beast, or some other character entirely: is Nishio-san a loving Beast or an admirable Beauty? Is the protagonist a needy Beast or an attractive Beauty? Does hunger become both Beauty and the Beast? Of one thing we are certain: beastly or beautiful, Nothomb ensures *Métaphysique des tubes* is not lacking in references to the fairy tale, and, in becoming a universally intertextual Nothombian topic, shows us that her thirst for the tale has not yet been quenched.

### Chapter 3 :

#### Nothomb's Neverland: *Peter Pan* in *Métaphysique des tubes*

*Peter Pan*, commonly thought to be a work of children's fantasy fiction,<sup>270</sup> is highlighted as a key piece in Swann's chronology of the evolution of the fairy tale,<sup>271</sup> supporting the previously suggested idea that the fantasy fiction, including children's fantasy fiction, 'grows out of the fairy tale'<sup>272</sup> itself. In fact, *Peter Pan* was first ascribed the genre of fairy tale in the years that closely followed its publication, but was called 'atypical' due to its 'combination of mortals and fairies. Peter Pan himself is both a fairy and a mortal'.<sup>273</sup> As we shall shortly see by clarification of contemporary definitions of fantasy fiction, the fusion of fantasy and reality described above by Braybrooke's quote means that *Peter Pan* is now more easily associated with fantasy fiction, as opposed to the fairy tale. It is also worth noting that similarly to the case of Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête*, the *Peter Pan* that we now know did not start life as a work for the younger audience, yet it remains 'the kind of text that adults continue to reinterpret for children'.<sup>274</sup> Barrie's *Peter Pan* originally appeared as part of a novel for adults in 1902 entitled *The Little White Bird*, before being transformed into the 1904 play *Peter Pan, or The Boy who Wouldn't Grow Up* and finally, in 1911, being reworked into *Peter and Wendy* (later republished as *Peter Pan*).<sup>275</sup> Even this version does not necessarily lend itself naturally to a child target audience, as Jacqueline Rose acknowledges: '*Peter Pan* has never, in any way,

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<sup>270</sup> The wide-spread belief that *Peter Pan* is a children's book is noted by Rose: '*Peter Pan* in so far as *Peter Pan* is the text for children which has made that claim so boldly, and which most clearly reveals it as a fraud', in Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, 3rd edn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 1. Morris also flags this point: 'It remains the kind of text that adults continue to reinterpret for children', in Tim Morris, *You're Only Young Twice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 89.

<sup>271</sup> *The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, xvii.

<sup>272</sup> 'Fantasy Literature and the Fairy Tale', p. 151.

<sup>273</sup> Patrick Braybrooke, *J.M. Barrie: A Study in Fairies and Mortals* (Lowestoft: F. Robinson & Co., 1924), p. 117.

<sup>274</sup> *You're Only Young Twice*, p. 89.

<sup>275</sup> Mary Louise Ennis, 'Peter Pan', in *The Oxford Companion*, ed. by Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 381.

been a book for children at all.<sup>276</sup> Rebecca Reynolds argues that ‘the *fin de siècle* nostalgia for childhood must be understood to be an *adult* preoccupation (most children at any time are only too anxious to grow up)’, justifying this belief by adding that ‘it is in books originally written for adult audiences that the fantasy of defying or controlling time (or the effects of maturity) first manifest [*sic*] itself’.<sup>277</sup> Peter Hunt expresses this viewpoint more explicitly, writing that *Peter Pan* is ‘an adult’s fantasy for an adult, about childhood, warped into the appearance of being for children’.<sup>278</sup> Yet the confusion surrounding the aptness in labelling *Peter Pan* a children’s fantasy reveals a great deal, not only about the fantasy genre itself, but also the novel in question.

Although not always, a substantial proportion of fantasy genre is often automatically connected to children,<sup>279</sup> as is the case with *Peter Pan*. Yet Peter Hunt shows this to be a reductive generalisation, as he states that ‘the association of fantasy with children – and childishness – is quite bizarre’ because the genre ‘concentrates on worlds other than this one: alternative worlds – desirable, if unattainable options’.<sup>280</sup> This suggests an adult’s, rather than a child’s, need to escape or regress to an alternative, simpler, and better reality than the one they exist in. Furthermore, *The Oxford Companion* definition of fantasy fiction requires that the genre is firmly anchored in reality and modern society, complete with heroic characters tainted by human flaw. From our world there is then a temporary transportation by dream or magic to the alternative fantastical land: ‘[t]he essence of fantasy literature is the confrontation of the ordinary and the fabulous’.<sup>281</sup> This combination would suggest a complex literary structure that, although enjoyed and interpreted by the child, is best understood by the adult. This belief is shared by Braybrooke, who believes only adults can

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<sup>276</sup> *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, p. 1.

<sup>277</sup> Kimberly Reynolds, *Children’s Literature in the 1890s and the 1990s* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1994), p. 17.

<sup>278</sup> Peter Hunt, ‘Introduction’, in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, ed. by Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz (London; New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 1-41 (p. 29).

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>281</sup> ‘Fantasy Literature and the Fairy Tale’, p. 154.

see the dark underlying nature of the tale, stating, 'I do not think that most children really understand the true significance of "Peter Pan."'"<sup>282</sup> The suggestion by Hunt that 'fantasy has an inevitable role as a commentary on, or counterpart to, reality and realism'<sup>283</sup> supports his previous theory that fantasy fiction allows adults to escape to a more idealistic reality, as to analyse one reality by creating a second we must first have a strong comprehension of our own, which children cannot have for lack of life experience. Considering the above, the status of children's fantasy inevitably becomes blurred, and leads us to ponder whether the fantasy is really for the child or the escapist needs of an adult. This question is particularly relevant when considering it in relation to Jacqueline Rose's statement that children's fiction is generally about the connection between adult and child and how it sets up 'a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)':<sup>284</sup> the weighting of the adult-child balance could be seen to echo the 'true' target audience. Her comments suggests a nuanced definition of child fantasy fiction, leading her reader to question whether the subcategory fantasy fiction aimed at children is misleading and reductive, as her quote shows that she believes the fantasy novels written for children to contain adult elements. However we choose to interpret *Peter Pan*, the relationship between the adult author and the child protagonist is highly interesting and deserves further analysis, as it will be shown to permeate the pages of the text in both content and structure. The following patterns will emerge: children and adults, and likewise males and females regularly and almost theatrically change places, and childhood will reveal itself as a dangerous utopia, the latter topic forming the first part of this chapter.

Nothomb, by way of echoing elements of *Peter Pan* as well as the themes mentioned above, introduces elements of fantasy fiction into her autobiographical novel. We have already acknowledged that *Métaphysique des*

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<sup>282</sup> J.M. Barrie: *A Study in Fairies and Mortals*, p. 122.

<sup>283</sup> 'Introduction', p. 8.

<sup>284</sup> *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, p. 1.

*tubes* pastiches the fairy tale without truly becoming one in its own right, just as by using children's stories the text does not become a text for children. Similarly, rather than becoming a rewriting of Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Nothomb's manipulation of fantasy fiction and allusion to Barrie's story creates a lasting and idiosyncratic impact on her style, as seen below. In connection to this, it is useful to consider Freud's theory on children's literature and childhood: Rose explains that what comes to the foreground is a certain irrelevance attached to the idea of a division between child and adult literature: '[t]he most crucial aspect of psychoanalysis for discussing children's fiction is its insistence that childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind.'<sup>285</sup> By writing or reading what is considered children's fiction, the adult is also benefiting greatly, reworking his or her own past and image to better their own understanding of the adult self. Furthermore, as noted above, a key idea of fantasy fiction is the departure from one world to another: this chapter will argue that through the act of writing Nothomb as author departs from reality and rediscovers her former childhood, and, similarly, Nothomb as protagonist departs from reality into her version of Peter's Neverland, her Japanese Eden, which epitomises Nothomb's positive image of childhood before collapsing and becoming inherently tainted by loss and mourning.

### Childhood motives and mirrors

Whether describing a boy who refuses to grow up, or a girl who revels in the beauty of childhood and sees maturity as an ugly demise, it is evident that both *Peter Pan* and *Métaphysique des tubes* both fundamentally approach and reflect upon the same core themes and portray childhood as a utopia from which departure brings destruction. According to Kimberley Reynolds, at the time that *Peter Pan* was written, 'childhood was regarded as both naively beautiful and brutishly threatening', which alerts us to potential sinister and paradoxical

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

undertones of childhood's portrayal in Victorian culture. While *Peter Pan* was published after the end of the Victorian era Reynolds treats the text as belonging to it: this is perhaps because the text is a rewriting of various, earlier tales. Furthermore, in late-Victorian Britain, she explains that childhood acquired a metaphoric value as a representation of the past, which was thought to be of general superiority to the present among many artists and writers.<sup>286</sup> Alison Lurie also acknowledges the Victorians' preference for prepubescent children and adds that they did not regard the death of a child as wholly negative, 'for if they never became adults they would escape worldly suffering and sin; they would remain forever pure and happy'. Of all the 'unaging innocents' that appeared in literary culture of the time, *Peter Pan* is said to be the most famous,<sup>287</sup> but it is perhaps due to additional underlying autobiographical reasons that Barrie's work highlights itself as a classic at a time when the image of the eternal child in literature was commonplace.

When we question the identity of Peter Pan, many theories emerge, the first of which is probably the most widespread. As Rose writes, '*Barrie is Peter Pan*': Barrie uses Peter as an inner child to recover his own childhood.'<sup>288</sup> Lurie also mentions this, stating 'many writers have seen him as a supernatural incarnation of Barrie himself; eternally young in spirit, the ideal companion and daring leader in childhood games'.<sup>289</sup> Yet, calling the book 'one of the most fragmented and troubled works in the history of children's fiction to date',<sup>290</sup> Rose is clearly aware of the simplistic, mask-like nature of her initial statement, as is Lurie when she adds 'but he [Peter] is also, as Barrie could not be, a real child'.<sup>291</sup> However, *The Oxford Companion* describes a second possibility for the roots of *Peter Pan*, which could clarify the ideas detailed above. Some critics

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<sup>286</sup> *Children's Literature in the 1890s and the 1990s*, p. 1, p. 21.

<sup>287</sup> Alison Lurie, *Not in Front of the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (London: Sphere, 1991), p. 138.

<sup>288</sup> *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, p. 6.

<sup>289</sup> *Not in Front of the Grown-ups*, p. 150.

<sup>290</sup> *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, p. 11.

<sup>291</sup> *Not in Front of the Grown-ups*, p. 150.

believe that the story and its eponymous protagonist result from Barrie's childhood experience of the death of his older brother. 'Because his mother became obsessive over her dead child (who never aged) and ignored the one who matured, Barrie immortalized an ageless youth who longs for a mother figure.'<sup>292</sup> David, the brother in question, died on the day before his fourteenth birthday and his mourning mother stayed in her bedroom for over a year. James Barrie, longing to be looked after once again, promised to his mother that he would fill David's footsteps and make her proud, but he went further still, and, as Lurie states 'in a peculiar, awful way, he became David'.<sup>293</sup> The third possibility arises as a result of a preface in the first written publication of the play *Peter Pan* in 1928. Amy Billone quotes the 1928 preface, in which Barrie supposes he created Peter 'by rubbing the five of you violently together, as savages with two sticks produce a flame. That is all he is, the spark I got from you'. Here he is referring to the five Llewelyn Davies boys whom he eventually adopted and to whom he oft told stories.<sup>294</sup>

Whether the reader chooses to believe that Peter is Barrie, David, a fusion of the Llewelyn boys, or an amalgamation of all these figures, one fact cannot be denied: Peter of *Peter Pan* is a complex character open to endless interpretation, and regardless of the protagonist's symbolic identity the reader notices a melancholy sadness, a shadow of death that lingers over and haunts many pages of the text. This is because all three major theories are riddled with loss – be it the loss of one's own, or another's childhood.<sup>295</sup> 'It is the symbol of a

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<sup>292</sup> 'Peter Pan', p. 381.

<sup>293</sup> *Not in Front of the Grown-ups*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>294</sup> Amy Billone, 'The Boy Who Lived: From Carroll's Alice and Barrie's Peter Pan to Rowling's Harry Potter', *Children's Literature Assembly* (Storrs, 2004) <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/display/printView.do?area=abell>> [accessed 10 May 2010] (para. 9 of 51)

<sup>295</sup> Interestingly a central idea of *Peter Pan*; an eternal child or childhood created and maintained through literature, riddled with melancholy, death and darkness, is not only found in Amélie Nothomb's literature, but also Philippe Forest's work, reinforcing the significance of the theme of the eternal child in addition to those of mourning and loss. Forest repeatedly alludes to *Peter Pan* in relation to the loss of his four-year-old daughter to cancer: the two most striking references of which are found in two of his texts (both in title and content): *L'Enfant éternel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) and *Tous les enfants sauf un* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007). The significance of storytelling,

striving against the inevitable',<sup>296</sup> Braybrooke writes, against which we are doomed to fail. Billone states that the ultimate theme of the book is in fact this confrontation with 'the distressing evaporation of innocence brought about by temporality itself'.<sup>297</sup> Death, mourning and loss are what lead me to call Barrie's utopic Neverland dangerous, or false. As we shall see shortly by further analysis, the glorification of childhood is constantly undermined in Barrie's work. Interestingly, Amélie Nothomb's text is also plagued by these negative themes, and a brief exploration into the potential reasons which led her to write *Métaphysique des tubes* highlights core echoes between her text and Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

One cannot fail to notice that Amélie Nothomb often speaks using highly negative terms when discussing the idea and emotions attached to growing up, and more specifically entering puberty.<sup>298</sup> In an interview with Frédéric Joignot for his *Le Monde* blog, *Mauvais Esprit*, Nothomb speaks in a series of nightmare-like associations: '[q]uitter l'enfance, devenir une femme, c'est [...] une chute terrible'. She talks of 'l'horreur absolue' experienced when faced with the idea of puberty, and describes it as 'ce désastre', 'ce monstre' that brought about

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literature, and imagery found in *Peter Pan* (to be studied in detail further on in this chapter), is explained clearly by Gill Rye as she analyses Forest's *L'Enfant éternel*: see 'Family Tragedies: Child Death in Recent French Literature' in *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory*, ed. by Marie-Claire Barnet and Edward Welch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 267-81 (p. 277): 'Yet storytelling is also prevalent within the diegesis itself, with the story of Peter Pan (J. M. Barrie's eternal child) operating both as an intertextual framing device to the novel and as Pauline's favourite story within it. [...] it [the emphasis on language] reflects the importance of words, and of writing, both in the commemoration of the life and death, and courage, of Pauline and in the preservation of, and reconnection with, the parent-child relationship. The latter is an extremely important element of Forest's novel.' When considered in relation to Nothomb, Barrie and their literature, Rye's argument also supports my theory detailed throughout this chapter that they both may use the power of words and storytelling, in a similar fashion to Forest, to live and exist through literature, either in order to rediscover a lost childhood, or reconnect with a lost child.

<sup>296</sup> J. M. Barrie: *A Study in Fairies and Mortals*, p. 121.

<sup>297</sup> 'The Boy Who Lived', para. 9 of 51.

<sup>298</sup> 'Entretien avec Amélie Nothomb', p. 563: 'nous faisons cela [actively stop eating] consciemment parce que nous ne voulions pas devenir adultes [...]'. See also Bainbrigge and den Toonder's 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 188: 'L'enfance, c'est l'âge parfait [...] L'adolescence vécue comme une monstruosité physique'.



'l'effroi à l'idée de sortir de l'enfance'.<sup>299</sup> This general fear can be better understood when read in conjunction with her perceived reasons for developing anorexia nervosa as a child. Nothomb states the following in relation to this: '[d]'abord, je ne voulais pas être séparée de ma sœur Juliette [...] devenir adulte est en soi une séparation d'avec ses proches, sa famille.'<sup>300</sup> Later she adds, 'l'effroi devant la sexualité aussi a joué [...] l'étymologie de sexe, c'est ce qui sépare, c'est encore une idée de séparation.'<sup>301</sup> Yet this terror and pain deeply associated with her past does not stop her writing about childhood, and may in fact propel her to do so. In the same interview she later admits, 'j'écris sur l'enfance pour retrouver mon enfance [...] le fait même d'écrire est une façon de prolonger l'enfance.' Furthermore, she writes to discover what she previously did not understand and to experience childhood memories once again.<sup>302</sup>

Barrie struggles against his separation with the child Llewelyn Davies boys as they grow up and move away, and with the separation he faced with the death of his brother, from both the brother and, as a result, from his own childhood. Likewise, Nothomb also struggles against separation from childhood, her sister, her family and childlike innocence and purity. Further analysis in this chapter will strengthen the already apparent notion that Nothomb seemingly shares the late-Victorian view of childhood ('for if they never became adults they would escape worldly suffering and sin; they would remain forever pure and happy').<sup>303</sup> This fact, when combined with echoing underlying reasons for writing *Métaphysique des tubes*, begins to explain the role and importance of *Peter Pan* within her own text. And, while death, mourning and loss will prove to stand in the foreground of both texts, the two books both open with a glorification of childhood, an abundance of happy images and beauty, all of which merit deeper

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<sup>299</sup> Frédéric Joignot, 'Amélie Nothomb. L'enfance à en mourir', *Mauvais Esprit : Le Monde*, (29 September 2008) <<http://fredericjoignot.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/09/29/73/>> [accessed 4 June 2011] (all found in 'A TREIZE ANS, AVOIR DES SEINS, QUELLE HORREUR!')

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., (found in 'LA FAIM ET LA SURFAIM')

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., (found in 'A TREIZE ANS, AVOIR DES SEINS, QUELLE HORREUR!')

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., (all found in 'AMÉLIE A TUÉ QUI?')

<sup>303</sup> *Not in Front of the Grown-ups*, p. 138.

examination. I have chosen to begin with a comparison between the beginnings of both texts, before revealing the fracture that splinters the perceived charm of Peter's Neverland and Nothomb's idyllic 'Eden'.

'L'enfance, c'est l'âge parfait'<sup>304</sup>

In both *Peter Pan* and *Métaphysique des tubes*, childhood is represented through the lexis of adventure. In Barrie's novel, even the first notions of Neverland, seen as a synonym for eternal childhood as we shall imminently discover, are described enthusiastically and associated with times of adventure. 'Of course the Neverlands vary a great deal' (*PP* 7), explains the narrator, indicating that each child has their own idiosyncratic Neverland, just as they experience their own individual childhood. Unlike adult minds, doctors cannot easily draw the minds of children, because Neverland blurs and confuses the adult doctor's image: '[t]here are zigzag lines on it, [...], and these are probably roads in the island; for Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there...' (*PP* 7). What follows on the same page is a list of exciting things found in their Neverland, including 'coral reefs', 'savages and lonely lairs', 'a hut going fast to decay', 'murders, hangings'. Already we can see hints at death and darkness, although at this point more importance is attached to the adventure and beauty of the island, in which adventures are 'nicely crammed' together, without 'tedious distances between one adventure and another' (*PP* 8). Everyone is said to have had a Neverland as a child, as the narrator explains that as adults 'we too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more' (*PP* 8). This sentence is very reminiscent of Barrie's imagery of a house used to describe childhood as seen from adulthood: '[h]is static image of the house full of rooms belies the secret that he always expresses but never makes overt: that we may only move

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<sup>304</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 188.

in one direction, that we can look back but never *go* back.’<sup>305</sup> It is an idea that is further justified in *Peter Pan* when Mrs Darling talks to Wendy about Peter. ‘After thinking back into her childhood she [Mrs Darling] just remembered a Peter Pan who was said to live with the fairies’, yet ‘now that she was married and full of sense she quite doubted whether there was any such person’ (*PP* 9). Neverland and the image of Peter Pan disappears with time and age, suggesting that it is common to all children, and is the magical part of imagination that to Barrie is synonymous with childhood. Of the three skills that, according to Billone, Barrie believes only children possess, the first two are most supportive of the above suggestion: ‘1) they can enter their own dreams and make these dreams come true; 2) they can play fantasy games in which the imaginary world takes the place of concrete reality.’<sup>306</sup>

It is hardly surprising then that Peter Pan’s Neverland, to which the Darling children are taken, is even more exciting than an ordinary child’s, given that it has continued to grow and flourish as he represents an eternal child. ‘Wendy, Wendy, when you are sleeping in your silly bed you might be flying about with me saying funny things to the stars’ (*PP* 38), landing afterwards on the island where fairies live alongside pirates and mermaids with ‘such long tails’ (*PP* 38). The excitement created by Peter Pan’s description of Neverland is enough to thwart all hesitation felt by Wendy, and the repetition of her emphatic ‘Oo!’ is a clear indicator of her enthusiasm. “‘Oo!’ she exclaimed rapturously [...] ‘Oh,’ cried Wendy, ‘to see a mermaid!’ (*PP* 38). Neverland is a metaphor for eternal childhood, and it is Peter’s promise of magical adventure that lures the children in. This suggests that it is fun and adventure that makes childhood seem utopic, keeping imagination alive, and the reason that Peter is so keen not to leave.

Similarly, adventure secures itself a central place in Nothomb’s representation of childhood. As soon as she discovers pleasure, which makes her

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<sup>305</sup> *You’re Only Young Twice*, p. 116.

<sup>306</sup> ‘The Boy Who Lived’, para. 33 of 51.

‘opérationnelle’, she sets about making up for lost time (MT 36). As she explains how she learns to walk the reader notices a change in the text, as the tone becomes more excitable and the lexis becomes associated mainly with action and adventure: ‘[e]t qui dit marcher dit courir: courir était cette trouvaille fabuleuse qui rendait possibles toutes les évasions. On pouvait s’emparer d’un objet interdit et s’enfuir en l’emportant sans être vue de personne’ (MT 36-7). She goes on to write, ‘c’était le verbe des bandits de grand chemin et des héros en général’ (MT 37). Moreover, as we encounter a stream of consciousness that sees Nothomb prioritise her first words, the punctuation showers exclamation marks over the pages concerned. Another example of this lexis is found as Nothomb undertakes a secret mission and talks Japanese to Nishio-san for the first time in the book. ‘J’avais le vocabulaire nécessaire – mais comment passer, en un coup, de six à mille mots sans révéler mon imposture ? [...] Je pouvais lui parler en cachette, camouflée par sa langue’ (MT 48). Another particularly pertinent example can be seen towards the end of the book just before it reaches its climax, which will be studied separately later in the chapter. Nothomb describes herself almost as an Indiana Jones of the kitchen, hunting for treasure to satisfy her need for sugary pleasure: ‘[j]e sautai sur la table et commençai l’ascension de la face nord du rangement à provisions. [...] je finirais bien par trouver le trésor de guerre, l’endroit où ma mère cachait le chocolat et les caramels’ (MT 117). The same adventure style continues and assures its deliberate placing in the text: ‘je fis exploser la serrure à la dynamite de ma convoitise. J’ouvris et découvris, yeux écarquillés, les doublons de cacao, les perles de sucre, les rivières de chewing-gum, les diadèmes de réglisse et les bracelets de marshmallow. Le butin’ (MT 117). By retelling banal events such as walking, talking and finding sweets as exciting adventures through a child-narrator perspective, Nothomb allows us to understand the role that adventure played in her childhood. Not confined solely to *Métaphysique des tubes*, Nothomb carries this method through all her autobiographical books relating to childhood, as we see her undertake various quests, including secretly drinking

flutes of champagne at a party (*BF* 43) and ransacking her neighbours' garages to find 'le trésor' that is Speculoos (*BF* 72). It is perhaps in *Le Sabotage amoureux*, however, that the theme of adventure becomes most apparent, with the opening line itself even being indicative of it: '[a]u grand galop de mon cheval, je paradais parmi les ventilateurs' (*SA* 5). Nothomb firmly establishes the importance of imagination and adventure during childhood by her intertextual echoing of adventure lexis, securing a fantasy-fiction feel to her works.

Yet the glorification of childhood is not bound purely to notions of adventure. For Nothomb adventure is fundamentally a way of obtaining pleasure and it is pleasure itself in all its forms (language, sugar, beauty etc.) that together form her utopic image of childhood. In *Métaphysique des tubes* this image is sustained most effectively by Nishio-san and 'l'âge divin': '[a]u pays du Soleil-Levant, de la naissance à l'école maternelle non comprise, on est un dieu. Nishio-san me traitait comme une divinité. [...] Moi, j'étais un *okosama* : une honorable excellence enfantine, un seigneur enfant' (*MT* 55). It is Nishio-san who spoils Amélie 'comme une poupée' (*MT* 58) with stories, wine, and affection, allowing her to continue believing in her divinity. 'A tout instant, si je lui demandais, elle abandonnait son activité pour me prendre dans ses bras, me dorloter, me chanter des chansons où il était question de chatons ou de cerisiers en fleur' (*MT* 56). It is Nishio-san's relationship to Amélie that suggests Amélie's counterpart in *Peter Pan* is Peter himself, and Nishio-san's is Wendy. Initially Nana the dog might initially appear to be a more obvious choice for Nishio-san's comparison given the similarity in their relationship to their respective families (both Nishio-san and Nana are nannies). However it is not Nana but Wendy who plays the mother role in Neverland and looks after Peter and the lost children: thus it is Nishio-san that looks after Amélie if we transfer protagonists. This also introduces an interesting gender blur as opposite genders are being compared for the same role (Amélie-Peter).

Similarities between the above characters become increasingly evident through analysis of the two texts: just as Nishio-san allows Amélie to replay her idealized childhood by prolonging her sense of divinity, Wendy allows Peter to act out his own notion of a perfect childhood, forever young, but with a mother and stories. They imagine a happy family: “[I] lovely, darling house,” Wendy said [...] “And we are your children,” cried the twins’ (*PP* 83). Wendy quickly mimics her mother, as the narration shows; ‘Wendy’s favourite time for sewing and darning was after they had all gone to bed’ (*PP* 88). In this way she tries to give the boys the love that she knows from her mother. The redskins call Peter ‘the Great White Father’ (*PP* 116) after he rescues Tiger Lily from the mermaids’ lagoon, which adds to the image of the happy home. Wendy is described as being ‘too loyal a housewife to listen to any complaints against father. “Father knows best,” she would say, whatever her private opinion’ (*PP* 117). Both Wendy and Peter imagine themselves as being adults, as is suggested when he is quoted as saying ‘Me! My old bones would rattle’ when asked by his ‘little man’ to dance (*PP* 121). And although this does not continue for long, as Peter grows scared that it is not make-believe, the very fact that he partook in the role-play shows a significant advancement in his own mentality. It proves the extent to which Wendy is helping secure his happiness, as normally every thought of growing-up, imaginary or real, is met with fear and repulsion. Perhaps the best gift that Wendy gives Peter is her stories, which is true also for Nishio-san and Nothomb. However, the role of literature is so vital and central to both novels that I have chosen to discuss this point separately at a later point in this chapter.

### The rise and fall of childhood innocence

Peter may first appear to be a positive ‘paragon of childhood innocence’<sup>307</sup> and Neverland a happy adventure, but it soon becomes evident that it is mourning and loss, death and darkness that occupy the foreground of

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<sup>307</sup> ‘The Boy Who Lived’, para. 33 or 51.

both character and setting in *Peter Pan*. This can in part be explained when we remember Barrie's motives for creating Pan, and accept that Peter is a recreation of someone lost, an idea described by Billone through her term 'dreamchild'.<sup>308</sup> I would argue that Nothomb also creates a dreamchild of her former child self, the loss of which generates a shadow of death in her book that, while not completely fulfilling the same role as in *Peter Pan*, shares some key similarities.

Sarah Gilead considers death as an omnipresent theme in Barrie's work, especially so in his 'morbid book'<sup>309</sup> - *Peter Pan*. She states that 'only death – literal or metaphorical – makes Barrie's child eternal; only after childhood ends can the adult reconstitute it as the object of desire, so that the concept originates in loss',<sup>310</sup> before adding shortly after that Barrie uses death as 'the strategy of refusal in the self's war against biological, generational processes',<sup>311</sup> echoing the Victorian *fin de siècle* mentality of death as a salvation for children, as written about previously.<sup>312</sup> Despite the alluring nature of Neverland – or perhaps due to this as we shall see is the case for Nothomb – even the first mentions of the island are tinged with danger and destruction: as the children catch sight of the 'fearsome island' for the first time 'fear fell upon them' (PP 50-1). The island is terrifying because it is real: children each play in their own Neverland until they grow up, but it is safe and they have adventures without fear because they know it is imaginary. The difference between a typical child's Neverland and Peter's is found in the fact that it has become his eternal reality: 'Thus sharply did the terrified three learn the difference between an island of make-believe and the same island come true' (PP 56). It could be interpreted

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., para. 6 of 51: Billone writes that an author, by writing down a dreamchild, inscribes 'the tragedy of these children's departures so intimately and so painfully into their narratives [...] that we as readers long for the children, too, grieve for the children, too'.

<sup>309</sup> Sarah Gilead, 'Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction', in *PMLA*, 106.2 (March 1991), pp. 277-93 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462663>> [accessed 10 May 2011] (p. 286)

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> It should be noted that although Barrie's *Peter Pan* was published until after the *fin de siècle* 1890s Victorian period, Reynolds discusses the tale in relation to this era. This is perhaps because the core plot was rewritten from Barrie's tales that were being written during the 1890s, or because she believes the boundaries of the era to be more ambiguous in certain circumstances. See *Children's Literature in the 1890s and 1990s*, pp. 17-24.

from this that the notions of an eternal childhood are in fact deadly and dangerous; childhood is safe so long as it is not overstayed, symbolically mirroring the feelings Barrie connects to childhood discussed earlier. This is supported by various other aspects of Neverland, including the underground home of the lost boys. 'There are here seven large trees, each having in its hollow trunk a hole as large as a boy' (*PP* 66) is suggestive of a tomb rather than a home, as each boy must fit his entrance before descending below ground into his home. 'Peter measures you for your tree as carefully as for a suit of clothes' (*PP* 85) under the guise of protection to keep adults out, but the reader could perhaps favour the dichotomous grave and tomb variant, in that by entering Neverland you are assuring your own demise. This is a theory that Gilead shares, stating 'Peter, like death, changes the boys to fit the entrances. When they shoot Wendy, they build a tiny house around her, like a tomb', securing her conclusion that 'Neverland is a realm of death under the cover story of boyish fun and adventure'.<sup>313</sup>

If we consider Nothomb's Neverland as representing the image of the eternal child as it does for Barrie in *Peter Pan*, then we could assume that the beauty and wonder of Nothomb's Neverland will also start to decay and become inherently tainted. I believe that Nothomb's version of Barrie's Neverland is represented initially in the beauty of her Japanese 'Eden' (*MT* 81), because the wonders of childhood for Nothomb are epitomised in the beauty and aquatic element of le Petit Lac Vert. The repetitive insistence of le Petit Lac Vert's natural beauty also supports the themes and symbolism of water studied in the second chapter of this thesis, reinforcing the positive aspects of the element, which can be reduced to three main categories: 'source de vie, moyen de purification, centre de régénérescence':<sup>314</sup> '[a]utour du Petit Lac Vert, les azalées explosèrent de fleurs. Comme si une étincelle avait mis le feu aux poudres, toute la montagne en fut contaminée. Je nageais désormais au milieu du rose vif' (*MT* 81).

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> *Dictionnaire des symboles*, p. 374.



This statement is a description of nature in May. It is at this point that the balance between the positive and negative associations becomes weighted towards the latter, and this in part due to the introduction of carp imagery previously analysed: the carp represents the male, but to Nothomb also the abject female form; excessive, mature, fully-developed. Her hatred towards the carps is mirrored by overpowering descriptions of the once formerly beautiful Eden: even the above description of May hints at the spring's demise into summer: 'exploser', 'feu' and 'vif' all introduce elements of danger and could be seen to warn the reader of the protagonist's plummet in mood that leads her to attempt suicide. In the second chapter<sup>315</sup> I connected the repulsive images of the carps to the oversaturated images of nature, indicating that the moving of the seasons from spring to summer could metaphorically represent Nothomb's realisation that she will also eventually have to develop.

Nothomb's Neverland becomes tainted at the point when the departure from childhood becomes clear and imminent to her. Her Neverland acquires an additional level of darkness when relating passages of anorexia nervosa found in *Biographie de la faim* to it. This comparison is relevant because Nothomb's Eden changes from the beauty of Japan that personifies the beauty of childhood to the desperate need to remain in childhood, the quest to remain an eternal child, found in her anorexia, and the negative associations attached to puberty which aggravate her search for eternal childhood. 'Dix ans: l'âge le plus haut de ma vie, la maturité absolue de l'enfance [...] Déjà ce goût de mort dans la saveur des choses, qui les rendait si sublimes et si déchirantes' (BF 127). While this quotation echoes ideas of a dangerous and attractive adventure noted previously in this chapter, it also contains a strong link between puberty and death. Interestingly, in order to avoid a spiritual death by entering womanhood, Nothomb favours a possible physical death illustrated by her later extreme state of starvation: this strengthens the level of disgust that Nothomb feels towards puberty. Death itself becomes an adventure, described using vocabulary

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<sup>315</sup> See ch. 2, p. 72.

emphasised previously as supporting the theme,<sup>316</sup> but also tainting it: '[l]a douleur était extraordinaire. Cela valait la peine, alors, de s'observer dans le miroir: j'étais un squelette au ventre hypertrophié. C'était si monstrueux que cela me ravissait' (BF 174). Nothomb describes her dying body with amazement and wonder. The negative images of Nothomb's natural Neverland seep into her identity and start to destroy it.

Nothomb's identity becomes increasingly destructive, which resonates in the image of Peter, whose identity also does not escape darker associations: '[h]e was a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees; but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth' (PP 13) is interpreted by Gilead in a highly interesting way. She writes, 'both boy eternal and rotting corpse, he arrives like a dream of immortality come true but also like a plague deadly to children – like aging and death, he empties the nursery.'<sup>317</sup> Not only this, but Wendy believes that 'Peter sometimes came to the nursery and [...] played on his pipes to her' (PP 10). This description may initially seem innocent, but when it is analysed in conjunction with the image of the Greek god Pan, a potentially more sinister side emerges. Varner explains in *The Mystic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature* that in Greek mythology Pan was the god who watched over fields, mountains and all things wild. The 'God of all Nature' was also the inventor of panpipes, 'wore a spotted fawn-skin resembling the stars of the sky' and had goat-like feet. Yet his character also had a darker side and he was known to cause panic and terror among humans. Furthermore, Varner writes that 'it is undoubtedly the image of Pan that the Christians took as their model for the personification of evil – Satan'.<sup>318</sup> Lurie writes that although Peter does not have goat feet, he 'is a child

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<sup>316</sup> See pp. 88-91 for an in-depth analysis of the lexis of adventure in *Peter Pan* and *Métaphysique des tubes*.

<sup>317</sup> 'Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction', p. 286.

<sup>318</sup> Gary R. Varner, *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature: The Re-emergence of the Spirit of Nature from Ancient Times into Modern Society* (United States: Algora Publishing, 2006), all p. 100.

who plays pipes and rides a goat' and is 'an incarnation of the Greek god Pan'.<sup>319</sup> In acknowledging this we can accept the possibility that Barrie may have chosen Pan over any other Greek god as a template for Peter not merely because the two rule over nature – Peter over the forests of Neverland where the lost boys live – but for Pan's frightening character, so as to symbolise the true emotions and themes of death and loss that lurk beneath the image of eternal childhood innocence. The impressions that the reader forms of Peter during the flight to Neverland in chapter four support the above theory, as we begin to find elements of darkness linked to Peter's personality as well as his outward image. Wendy, David and Michael, yet to master the art of flying, would fall from the sky to the earth if they fell asleep, yet despite eventually being caught by Peter, his reaction is unexpected. 'The awful thing was that Peter thought this funny. 'There he goes again!' he would cry gleefully, as Michael suddenly dropped like a stone' (*PP* 46). Furthermore, when leading the game 'follow my leader', 'Peter would fly close to the water and touch each shark's tail in passing, just as in the street you may run your finger along an iron railing' (*PP* 47), an activity that the others could not copy if they wished to remain alive. Peter, who initially fled to Neverland to avoid death and aging, now seems to be chasing and taunting death at every opportunity, as if it were a game. Moreover, in spite of his childlike image, he is violent, dangerous and even the lost boys fear him at times because he turns on his own kind, as the narrator explains that 'Peter thins them out' if they break the rules and grow up (*PP* 59). Peter's ability to induce fear in humans mirrors the Greek god Pan's ability, and is strengthened by a lost boy's - Tootles' - reaction to shooting Wendy from the sky: he attempts to flee. "'I must," he answered, shaking; "I am so afraid of Peter"' (*PP* 74). Further still, just as Pan has a satanic side, so too does Peter, who sometimes commits evil acts: when the children decide to leave Neverland leaving him behind, he takes rapid breaths, for 'there is a saying in the Neverland that every time you breathe, a grown-up dies; and Peter was killing them off vindictively as fast as possible' (*PP*

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<sup>319</sup> *Not in Front of the Grown-ups*, p. 48.

131). Moreover, just as he empties the nursery, so too does he empty Hook's ship: the personification of death itself, Peter sweeps like a deadly curse through the ship. Lurking in Hook's cabin, he kills off the pirates one by one (*PP* 169).

Yet it is when Peter's dark side fuses with adventure that his double is so clearly mirrored in Nothomb's character. His fun adventures are often synonyms for murder: 'You don't think I would kill him while he was sleeping! I would wake him first, and then kill him' (*PP* 52). At the Mermaids' lagoon Peter senses an imminent pirate attack, and while the others are overtaken with a sense of doom, Peter is happy: 'a strange smile was playing on his face, and Wendy saw it and shuddered' (*PP* 97). This attitude is reinforced several times, including as he hunts for Hook's ship to rescue Wendy and the boys. Despite the fact that 'he knew that sudden death might be at the next tree [...] He was frightfully happy' (*PP* 155). Perhaps the epitome of this mind-set is found when Peter faces the real possibility of his own death. After the attack at the Mermaids' lagoon Peter is injured so that he can neither swim nor fly. Saving Wendy, he waits alone to drown. The narrator writes that 'Peter was not quite like the other boys; but he was afraid at last. [...] Next moment he was standing erect on the rock again, with that smile on his face and a drum beating within him. It was saying, 'To die will be an awfully big adventure' (*PP* 110).

There are two interesting things here to note: firstly, both Peter and Nothomb's first near-death experiences were due to near drowning, reinforcing the symbolism of water as seen in the second chapter of this thesis, and the power of nature over man. Acknowledging the danger of the sea, Nothomb writes, 'je regardais la mer avec terreur et désir. [...] Je poussai un hurlement de plaisir et d'extase' (*MT* 69). Moreover, despite describing the event using violent lexis which, as we shall soon discover, mirrors Nishio-san's account of 'drowning' beneath the rubble of buildings, Nothomb continues to value and cherish the beauty of her own Japanese Neverland. Compare the following: '[l]'eau m'avalait [...] chaque fois que ma tête émergeait, une vague nouvelle me la replongeait

sous les flots, tel un tortionnaire cherchant à me soutirer des aveux (MT 70)' with '[l]a lumière du soleil n'avait jamais été aussi belle qu'à travers les profondeurs de la mer. Le mouvement des vagues propageait des ondes étincelantes. J'en oubliai d'avoir peur de la mort (MT 69). The first quote suggests a punishment, describing the drowning as understandably dangerous and frightening, yet the second quote contrasts sharply with the first, and in a way that mimics Barrie's narration of his character Peter Pan, reinstates a sense of beauty and adventure that overpowers the terror of death itself. This is in fact the second point to consider – Pan describes death as a big adventure, and this attitude is echoed by Nothomb, who explains herself by referring to Eurydice. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in Greek mythology Eurydice, upon her marriage to Orpheus, is killed by snakebite and sent to the Underworld. Orpheus ventures to rescue her, and she is released on the condition that neither looks back to the Underworld. Orpheus, overjoyed by the beauty and hope of the sun, looks back to share his delight and Eurydice is thus lost once again.<sup>320</sup> Reflecting upon death after the loss of her grandmother, Nothomb writes '[m]ort! Qui mieux que moi savait? Le sens de ce mot, je venais à peine de le quitter!' (MT 45). Considering her first years as a death of sorts, she returns to life as did Eurydice, forever after tasting death as something sweet: '[c]eux qui, [...], ont connu la mort de trop près et en sont revenus contiennent leur propre Eurydice. [...] Eurydice est si séduisante qu'on a tendance à oublier pourquoi il faut lui résister' (MT 46-7). The myth of Eurydice could also be transferred onto the character of Peter Pan, who in opting for a new life in Neverland loses the one he had on the Mainland with his parents, who forget about him and believe him dead. Yet the life he chooses secures not only his perceived death, but his symbolic one – for as we are beginning to see, and will analyse further, life on the island of Neverland is ruled by death, and just as Eurydice ultimately dies a second time, so does Pan as he finds himself locked psychologically in Neverland as if in prison or death itself.

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<sup>320</sup> 'Orpheus', *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (2011)  
 <<http://www.britannica.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/EBchecked/topic/433177/Orpheus>> [accessed 10 June 2011]

Both Peter Pan and Nothomb having met with death no longer fear it, and this explains Peter's belief that death is an adventure, and his behaviour that hunts death as if teasing and taunting it to attack. Nothomb, too, plays with danger, and writes 'les choses les plus séduisantes étaient forcément les plus dangereuses, comme se pencher trop par la fenêtre ou se coucher au milieu de la rue' (*MT* 105). This quote in part defines her favourite game, 'le défi', in which you must lie in the middle of the road, sing a song in your head 'jusqu'à la fin de la rengaine, sans bouger, quoi qu'il arrive' (*MT* 106). Moreover, this combination of death and seductive adventure seeps through the pages of *Métaphysique des tubes* and, as seen in the previous chapter, influences lexis, structure and becomes commonplace, just as it does in *Peter Pan*. However it is important to consider that death and danger also generate, and are generated by, a loss, and while adventure and destruction commonly join forces in both books, there is also an air of sadness to them both that cannot be escaped.

### Mourning childhood's end

Sadness and tragedy are perhaps best exemplified in *Peter Pan* not by what is written, but by what is omitted, by the negative space that lives between the lines and behind the text, but is there for all those who search for it. When first introduced to Peter, it is Wendy's questions and reactions that make us aware of what he is lacking: "'Don't get any letters,'" he said contemptuously. "But your mother gets letters?" "Don't have a mother," he said' (*PP* 29). While the narrator tries to convince us that Peter doesn't care for mothers or have any desire to have one, we will become aware that this could not be further from the truth. Wendy, once again, sees through this, as the narrator writes, 'Wendy, however, felt at once that she was in the presence of a tragedy' (*PP* 29). Without the role of a mother being present in his life, he too is lacking knowledge of various elements that mothers would bring to the Mainland children's lives: "'Surely you know what a kiss is?" she asked, aghast' (*PP* 31), but without

motherly affection, he does not. When Wendy asks his age, Peter replies uneasily that he doesn't know (*PP* 32). And in calling himself 'captain' of the lost boys, while there is a sense of adventure discussed previously, there is also a sense of tragedy. As captain, he is the most lost of the lost boys. While by day he busies himself with dangerous adventures, at night his apparent happiness is juxtaposed with a deep despair: '[f]or hours he could not be separated from these dreams, though he wailed piteously in them. They had to do, I think, with the riddle of his existence' (*PP* 148). Moreover, while he insists that he does not want a mother, we learn that the real reason behind his ambivalent mask is sadness: 'I thought like you that my mother would always keep the windows open for me; [...] and then I flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me' (*PP* 130). In truth he longs for a mother, as he agrees with the lost boys when he says 'what we need is just a nice motherly person' (*PP* 84).

The notion of something lost, lacking, does not confine itself to Peter and his lost boys. It is recognisable also among the pirates, and especially Hook. In fact the lost boys could be interpreted as child doubles of the pirates, and Peter the double of Hook. Hook is also motherless, and when he learns that Wendy is mothering the children, the narrator writes that 'he sat with his head on his hook in a position of profound melancholy' (*PP* 100). Perhaps the most pertinent example that shows the parallel between the pirates and the lost boys occurs at the end of the book, as Peter and the boys kill Hook and the pirates only to become them. 'Against her will' Wendy makes Peter a suit 'out of some of Hook's wickedest garments' (*PP* 181). Furthermore, there are rumours that 'he sat long in the cabin with Hook's cigar-holder in his mouth and one hand clenched [...] like a hook' (*PP* 181). Hook is also plagued by time, personified by a crocodile that swallowed a clock that means before it can kill him, Hook can escape. Yet, time will run out, and when it does the clock will stop ticking and Hook will perish (*PP* 68). 'Hook stood shuddering, one foot in the air' (*PP* 70) as he hears the ticking of the crocodile approach, and when Peter imitates the

crocodile at the final battle, Hook's fear transforms him into a little boy: '[v]ery frightful was it to see the change that came over him. It was as if he had been clipped at every joint. He fell in a little heap' (PP 165). Billone writes that 'Captain Hook is really a child playing the part of a grown-up [...] He understands the world of Neverland, and would never choose to leave it'.<sup>321</sup> His reaction to Wendy and to the crocodile supports this fully as well as the idea that Hook may form a double to Peter. Lurie also suggests this, stating 'in fact, Peter Pan and Captain Hook are not so much opposites as two sides of the same coin'.<sup>322</sup> However she also notes an important fact when she states, 'an even darker side of Barrie's vision appears in the character of Captain Hook, who significantly also turns out to be named James and shares his inventor's fondness for cigars'.<sup>323</sup> A further confusion unfolds when *The Oxford Companion* states that while 'Hook represents Peter's adult self', Hook and Mr. Darling in the play version are played by the same actors.<sup>324</sup> Even in the book the adult Mr. Darling is much like a young boy, whether he is throwing a tantrum over a tie (PP 17), or mirroring the thoughts of Neverland as he says 'I am not sure we have a drawing room, but we pretend we have, and it's all the same' (PP 193). I would suggest the following interpretation: Pan, Hook, the lost boys and the pirates, Mr. Darling and Barrie as author and narrator are all fundamentally the same character, presented in the story under various guises. They all fear maturity and the loss of childhood innocence, yet they all have lost it and are hunting it down in different ways. Each character is a personification of childhood's end. Even Pan, who in favouring an eternal childhood in Neverland, loses his real childhood with his parents.

Childhood is also constantly ending in *Métaphysique des tubes* and in this way it becomes a leitmotif, a ghost that haunts the pages of the story, claiming each new stage of childhood and staining it anew with death. Nothomb starts life

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<sup>321</sup> 'The Boy Who Lived', para. 24 of 51.

<sup>322</sup> *Not In Front of the Grown-ups*, p. 151.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> 'Peter Pan', p. 381.



as a representation of death, as 'Dieu le tube' does not have 'un regard' which is needed to be alive rather than to just exist (*MT* 6). Then the child comes to life after becoming a beast and calming down thanks to the gift of pleasure, but Nothomb knows that she has lost the pure stage of divinity she had before: thus in being born a second time, she also dies again. However she is treated 'comme une divinité' (*MT* 55) as all babies are in Japan, and this new-found divinity replenishes her as it forms a substitute, displacing the sense of loss and mourning, allowing her to undertake adventures and come to life. Death tries to chase her, as previously seen by analysis of near-death drowning, and it successfully catches up again, as the book reaches its climax, initiated by Nishio-san's intended demission and discovery of the family's eventual departure from Japan. Mark Lee writes, 'Amélie drowns not once, not even twice, but at least three times in the novel [...] In between the two, however, a metaphorical drowning marks the definitive end of her childhood perfection.'<sup>325</sup> It is at this moment that the notion of bereavement is first acknowledged: '[j]e mourais déjà. Je venais d'apprendre cette nouvelle horrible [...] ce que tu aimes, tu vas le perdre [...] ta vie entière sera rythmée par le deuil' (*MT* 124). As a direct result, Nothomb decides it is vital to place more emphasis on memory: '[p]uisque tu ne vivras toujours au Japon, [...], tu as pour devoir de te rappeler ces trésors. Le souvenir a le même pouvoir que l'écriture' (*MT* 127). The recipe for Nothomb's story dates back to this moment: death, joy and the need to remember fuse and initiate a need in Amélie that will never quite be satisfied: the need to write childhood's end. Mark Lee argues it is this end that creates her new beginning which is to span her literary career; 'by adopting *other* means, childhood and its end are incessantly re-imagined, displaced and condensed into strange, often unrecognizable forms.' He later adds, 'she especially binds herself as author to re-enact – by different means – a narrative of closure that, [...], defines and drives her literary imagination.'<sup>326</sup> Yet literature is not just invaluable to

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<sup>325</sup> Mark D. Lee, 'Amélie Nothomb: Writing Childhood's End', in *Amélie Nothomb*, ed. by Bainbrigge and den Toonder (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 142-53 (p. 148).

<sup>326</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: Writing Childhood's End', pp. 142-3.

Nothomb for this reason alone, and a deeper examination of the role of literature shortly in both *Peter Pan* and *Métaphysique des tubes* will bring to light the extent to which the two stories rely on literature for survival.

Not only is there a sense of mourning for childhood, but Nothomb's text also makes the reader aware of another loss: that of her stable identity and nationality. Bainbrigge writes that 'the experience of exile is not unfamiliar' to Nothomb, 'a confessed "apatride belge" whose life, [...], is punctuated by moves to different countries, all beyond European frontiers.'<sup>327</sup> Moreover, she states, 'given the young Amélie's in-between status of feeling neither affiliation to Belgium nor the Far East there is a tendency to express a sense of isolation in terms of both cultures.'<sup>328</sup> While she deduces this from her work as a whole and various interviews with the author, the general sense of isolation and non-belonging can be related to and sensed in *Métaphysique des tubes*. First and foremost, despite being European, she rejects her nationality in favour of the Occident, talking Japanese with greater fluency and deciding bluntly, 'je serais japonaise' (MT 56). Yet despite the emphasis on Japanese beauty and the love of Nishio-san, both of which we have previously analysed, the positivity and enthusiasm attached to Japan and Japanese identity cannot be fully accepted, as bitter tones are found throughout the text. As she drowns in the sea, Japanese onlookers do nothing, but not out of laziness or spite: it is a rule 'au vieux principe Nippon de ne jamais sauver la vie de quiconque, car ce serait le contraindre à une gratitude trop grande pour lui' (MT 68). Nothomb later adds, 'sauver la vie d'un être revenait à le réduire en esclavage pour cause de reconnaissance exagérée. Mieux valait le laisser mourir que le priver de sa liberté' (MT 73). While she can explain this mentality, she cannot fully understand it. Another example of this is seen with the description accompanying Nishio-san's twins. Nothomb writes, 'elle les nommait toujours *futago* et j'ai longtemps cru que ce mot duel était le prénom d'un seul enfant. [...] La gémellité doit être au

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<sup>327</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: "Une apatride belge"?', p. 175.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

Japon un problème plus grave qu'ailleurs' (*MT* 54-5). Bainbrigge describes Nothomb as 'being "in" a country (Japan, China, Belgium, America) but not "of" it, and not fully accessing and integrating the collective identity of those around her'. However, where she is lacking identity she finds a substitute which will be more closely examined towards the end of this chapter: Bainbrigge highlights, 'if the author presents herself as [...] possessing identities both hybrid and in-between, her writings also bear witness to her engagement with and immersion in a rich network of historic, cultural and literary sources.'<sup>329</sup>

In *Peter Pan* the trope of identity instability is also not easily resolved. The loss is encountered, as previously noted, when Peter and the lost boys show little knowledge of themselves or of motherly affection, and is strengthened further by an amnesia that is seemingly the virus of Neverland for the young. Even the Darling children are affected, and to try and combat this Wendy sets texts asking questions about their parents: 'John remembered his parents vaguely only, as people he had once known, while Michael was quite willing to believe that she was really his mother' (*PP* 89). However, the narrator highlights that the questions are set in the past tense, as 'Wendy, you see, had been forgetting too' (*PP* 90). Yet no other character is so plagued by amnesia as Peter. The narrator explains as Hook bites Peter that the 'real difference between him and all the rest' is that he always forgets 'the first unkindness' (*PP* 107). On the flight to Neverland, Wendy has to remind him who she is. Peter replies, 'always if you see me forgetting you, just keep saying "I'm Wendy", and then I'll remember' (*PP* 49). One year as Peter returns to the Darlings' house to borrow a daughter for a spring clean, he shocks Wendy. 'Who is Captain Hook? He asked with interest when she spoke of the arch enemy' (*PP* 197) and '[w]ho is Tinker Bell?' (*PP* 198). The role of amnesia in Neverland could be interpreted in a few ways: it could be seen to show an incompatibility between Neverland and reality, reinforcing the idea of loss as one must be chosen at the peril of the other. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as a protective factor, repressing the truth

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

to save the children from despair as they realise what they have left behind. A further possibility could show the image of the eternal child to be illusory, as the longer you stay in Neverland the more you forget – just as is symptomatic of old age. However each option supports the notion of a lost identity.

A lack of identity is also suggested by Barrie's reference to children as birds in *Peter Pan*, causing the reader to rethink the idiom 'free as a bird'. The imagery of birds that Barrie creates in *Peter Pan* echoes the arguments of Bainbrigge's previously noted association between exile and isolation and supports the identity instability contained in the status of amnesia in Barrie's tale. It does so by compounding the belief that any possible nationality that a character could assimilate is partially rejected, casting a negative light over the text. This partly positive and partly negative image of identity and belonging is attributed to the imagery of birds in Barrie's *Peter Pan*: as a bird, the children of Neverland have the ability to fly between worlds, all the while not belonging wholly to either, bringing a certain nomadism to their lives. While references start in a traditional fashion, 'the birds were flown [*sic*]' (PP 44), they become increasingly unusual and negative. Wendy arrives on the island after having been shot down from the sky, hunted and captured. She is 'a great white bird' (PP 71) which Slightly knows to be a Wendy bird. "'I remember,'" said Slightly instantly, "there are birds called Wendies"' (PP 73). After she falls, they know that she is in fact a girl, but this changes little to the symbolic meaning of her fall: Neverland is a hunter, dangerous, holding you captive as a prisoner to the island, as it does Peter. Peter himself is referred to as a crow on several occasions. As he hides in Hook's cabin waiting to kill pirates, a 'crowing sound' was heard that was well understood by the other boys (PP 169). When he appears at Wendy's window many years later 'she heard a crow. Then the window blew open as of old and Peter dropped on the floor' (PP 203). This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, crows are told to be 'masterful mimics',<sup>330</sup> which rings true to Peter's character,

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<sup>330</sup> 'Crow', *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (2011)

who mimics Wendy, Hook and the crocodile to such perfection that his disguise is never questioned. Secondly, the crow is a general symbol for death, and in the Slavic fairy tale *The Magic Swan-Geese* involving Baba Yaga a witch whose spirit is said to take the form of a crow leads a flock of birds to assist her in kidnapping children.<sup>331</sup> This casts a rather new, morbid light over *Peter Pan*: becoming Peter Pan and embodying the image of the eternal child could be fatal. An interesting comparison can be made here to Nothomb: in trying to remain a child Nothomb will first attempt suicide in the carps' pond as previously studied and then develop anorexia nervosa as an adolescent: Nothomb too is snatched from her life as a child in order to try and stay one, but, as for Peter, this has devastating effects.

### Living through literature

Another striking similarity between *Peter Pan* and *Métaphysique des tubes* is found in the role of literature in the two novels, and the influence it has on the protagonists' identities. It would seem that literature fulfils two principal functions; I will argue that it provides Peter and Nothomb with material to mimic and to aid the forming of one's own identity, and secondly, growing from this, I shall show how literature replaces identity and nationality, providing some stability to two otherwise nomad characters.

Nishio-san can be found at the heart of Nothomb's early love of gruesome stories, the repetitive emphasis of which indicates the level of importance that the author accords them. Nothomb writes initially, 'Nishio-san avait vraiment de belles histoires à raconter: les corps y finissaient toujours en morceaux' (MT 52). This highlights once more the aforementioned Eurydician notion of death as being seductive, which is then reinstated yet again no more

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<<http://www.britannica.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/EBchecked/topic/144375/crow>> [accessed 10 June 2011]

<sup>331</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, 'Baba Yaga', in *The Oxford Companion*, ed. by Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 33.

than a few pages later: '[e]lle était toujours prête à me raconter ses histoires de corps coupés en morceaux qui m'émerveillaient', Nothomb explains, adding, 'ou alors la légende de telle ou telle sorcière qui cuisait les gens dans un chaudron pour en faire de la soupe : ces contes adorables me ravissaient jusqu'à l'hébétude' (MT 57-8). However, Nishio-san's stories, more than simply existing to provide entertainment and pleasure, help form the very essence of Nothomb's being. Let us consider one of Nishio-san's memories, recounted as a nightmarish tale to Nothomb at an early age. The 'récit de cauchemar' tells of a round of Kobe bombings in 1945, in which she loses her parents. Buried after an explosion under the rubble of her apartment block, she begins to head towards the surface, where she believes life remains: "'[c]'est là qu'il y a la vie", lui avait dit son instinct. Il l'avait trompé: c'était là qu'il y avait la mort' (MT 51). Here begins the blur between life and death, which is further complicated by Nothomb's reaction to the sombre story: '[j]e la réclamai avec enthousiasme' (MT 51). Yet the most revealing aspect comes next. Every time she reaches the surface, she finds herself back under a new wave of rubble. Nothomb subtly changes the narrator from herself to Nishio-san, who writes, 'je creusais, je creusais, et chaque fois que je me retrouvais à la surface, j'étais à nouveau enterrée par une explosion' (MT 51-2). Despite indicating that the story is being told by Nishio-san and merely quoted by Nothomb, the length of the story, told over two and a half pages, allows this fact to be forgotten, and the resulting narrative blur permits the story to become integral to Nothomb's character: rather than Nishio-san telling the story, it appears that the young girl is recounting the story and claiming it as her own. The unusual amount of detail is indicative of its lasting impression on her, but it is a later echo of the story, found at the scene of her own drowning as previously mentioned ('[l]'eau m'avalait [...] chaque fois que ma tête émergeait, une vague nouvelle me la replongeait sous les flots, tel un tortionnaire cherchant à me soutirer des aveux' (MT 70)), that confirms to the reader that Nothomb has been highly affected and influenced by Nishio-san's narrative. Nishio-san's story could also be interpreted as a macabre

parody of Nothomb's mentality and existence as both sustain the same life-death-life rhythm, supported also by the theme of Eurydice. Mark Lee forms a similar argument, crediting Nishio-san as 'the person who imparts a model of narration uncannily similar to Nothomb's own', adding later that the Japanese governess provides Nothomb with 'the very master-narrative of childhood's end that, because it proceeds Nothomb's own repeated recounting, appears to found and inform all others'.<sup>332</sup>

Likewise, stories are at the heart of *Peter Pan*. The adventure to Neverland owes its very existence to Peter's greed for and need of stories. As Tim Morris highlights, 'one must remember that Peter Pan is not the seducer but the seduced.'<sup>333</sup> Initially Peter had come to the nursery window to listen to Mrs. Darling tell her children stories and on the night of the adventure he returns to reclaim his shadow but additionally hear the end of *Cinderella* (PP 36). "'Do you know,'" Peter asked, "why swallows build in the eaves of houses? It is to listen to the stories. O Wendy, your mother was telling such a lovely story'" (PP 37). Given that Peter and the lost boys know no stories, he is so excited when Wendy reveals the ending of the tale that he runs to the window to leave and inform them. It is then that Wendy seduces Peter with fiction: "'[d]on't go, Peter,'" she entreated, "I know such lots of stories'" (PP 37). The importance of storytelling becomes a leitmotif in the book, especially among the lost boys. Literature secures a more significant role than many other childhood necessities for them, and it is the reason above all others that the boys long for Peter to return. Slightly, a lost boy, says 'but I wish he would come back, and tell us whether he has heard anything about Cinderella' (PP 65). The same story is mentioned a further time, as Wendy fills the motherly role in Neverland; '[a]nd before I put you to bed I have just time to finish the story of Cinderella' (PP 84). I believe that Barrie's choice to use *Cinderella* as the story which sparks enthusiasm among the lost boys, and Peter especially, is also significant. This conclusion can be reached

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<sup>332</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: Writing Childhood's End', p. 150.

<sup>333</sup> *You're Only Young Twice*, p. 118.

when transferring what we have already discovered about the role of fairy tales among children and how the stories act as templates to which individual experiences can be moulded. *Cinderella* is widely known as a tale of hope, falling into the sub-genre tale type of the 'innocent persecuted heroine'.<sup>334</sup> Escaping from the abuse of a hostile stepmother, Cinderella eventually marries a prince and starts a better life. Is Barrie suggesting that the lost boys and Peter, having left their mothers for Neverland, hoped to have a better life with eternal childhood and find joy in recognising that they have, like Cinderella, achieved this? Or perhaps there is a sadder possibility that the happy promise of Neverland was as fleeting as Peter's memory became. Either way, an interesting theme emerges, which will form a separate section later in this chapter. Firstly, in *Cinderella*, 'young women's maturational experiences' are represented, as the protagonist must change from child to adult if she is to grow in bravery and marry a prince.<sup>335</sup> The lost boys and Peter, in comparing themselves to Cinderella, introduce a gender blur which is found often in the novel and mirrored in *Métaphysique des tubes*.

Leaving this theme momentarily aside, we can also see that stories and literature help Peter and the lost boys to contemplate their identity, albeit in a slightly different way than for Nothomb. The nuance is subtle. The stories that Nothomb hears from Nishio-san are mirrored in her life experiences and help form Nothomb's Eurydician mentality, whereas in *Peter Pan* the stories that the boys hear are mirrors to what their life will hold when all, bar Peter, are adopted into the Darling family and grow old and happy in their new life. For Peter himself, it highlights the vicious circle of his existence, as Tim Morris suggests as he writes, 'to get stories, he must have a mother. [...] But to get the mother he must grow up, and if he grows up the stories will cease to matter.'<sup>336</sup> Yet a paradox of Peter Pan's life is found in that by continuing his vicious circle and

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<sup>334</sup> Cristina Bacchilega, 'An Introduction to the "Innocent Persecuted Heroine" Fairy Tale', *Western Folklore*, 52.1 (January 1993) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1499490>> [accessed 10 June 2011] (p. 1 of 12).

<sup>335</sup> 'An Introduction to the "Innocent Persecuted Heroine" Fairy Tale', p. 6 of 12.

<sup>336</sup> *You're Only Young Twice*, p. 118.



forgoing the possibility for regular stories, he in turn becomes one. *Peter Pan* becomes a mise en abyme towards the end of the novel, as Wendy recounts the tale of her time in Neverland to her daughter Jane. ““You’ve missed a bit,” interrupts Jane, who now knows the story better than her mother’ (PP 201) suggests that the story is often told. However the echo of the tale continues in another way, as the story repeats itself in an eerie fashion, as if itself suffering from amnesia as Peter seemingly does. Peter, once having realised that Wendy is now an old lady, begins to cry on the nursery floor. Jane, echoing Wendy’s initial line, says, ““Boy,” [...] “why are you crying?”” (PP 205). Originally when Wendy meets Peter, he ‘rose and bowed to her beautifully. She was much pleased, and bowed beautifully to him from the bed’ (PP 28). Likewise, this time upon meeting Jane, ‘Peter rose and bowed to her, and she bowed to him from the bed’ (PP 205). However now, rather than *Cinderella*, the Darling daughter descendants in turn as children tell Peter ‘stories about himself, to which he listens eagerly’ (PP 206). The book’s ending has an oneiric quality as the book repeats on itself, but it also seems tragic. Being told stories about his life and listening ‘eagerly’ suggests that he believes each year that they are new to him, and various mentions of his memory loss imply that the story of Wendy’s time in Neverland is also new fiction. It could be inferred from this that Peter’s sole stable identity exists in literature, as the Darling family ensure its continuation and repeat it to Peter each time upon his return. However Jacqueline Rose reminds us of a further echo. Concerning the successful creation of an eternal child, she states, ‘there are only two ways of making sure of this – having the child die early, or, alternatively, writing the child down.’<sup>337</sup> For Barrie, writing *Peter Pan* helps fix his memory of childhood, just as hearing Wendy’s *Peter Pan* reminds Peter of the childhood he has already lived and forgotten.

I would argue that Nothomb as both author and writer also finds her identity primarily in literature and stories, a connection which starts at an early age in *Métaphysique des tubes* but which is also highly visible in her adult self as

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<sup>337</sup> *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 25.

a successful author. I suggest that this is achieved by following the same pattern found in *Peter Pan*: by discovering her passion for literature and then using it as a substitute for an identity. Literature becomes her as she becomes literature. Firstly, the sheer quantity of references to and pastiching of stories suggest an importance that Amélie confirms in an interview with Bainbrigge and den Toonder: '[j]e peux vraiment dire que la littérature m'a sauvée.'<sup>338</sup> In *Métaphysique des tubes*, Nothomb presents literature as another secret that is her own and gives her pleasure, '[q]uand j'avais un *Tintin* ouvert sur les genoux, personne ne savait que je lisais. [...] En secret, je lisais la Bible' (MT 99). The same sentence appears in *Biographie de la faim* in a slightly different form which gives it further meaning, '[j]e lisais *Tintin* avec plaisir et la Bible avec un effroi très agréable' (BF 51). She refers to the latter as 'ce texte fantôme' (BF 50) because it haunts Japanese language and idioms while not forming their main religion. This lexis reintroduces the shadow of death and its combination with satisfaction and joy, reinforcing the notion that Nothomb mirrors, or is mirrored by, her choice of and associations with literature. Moreover, just as in Barrie's book Peter's obsession with *Cinderella* is very revealing about his own psychology and wishes, Nothomb's fixation on *The Thousand and One Nights* is also very telling about herself. 'Je préférais les contes, dont j'avais faim et soif [...] En Chine, ce furent les contes de *Mille et Une Nuits*, [...] à qui je dois les plus violentes émotions littéraires de mes six ans' (BF 74). This quote also shows how hunger and thirst, studied in the previous chapter, is a Nothombian theme from an early age. Moreover, while she provides the never-ending beauty of the princesses as the reason for her love of the tales, another interpretation is possible. *The Thousand and One Nights* is a frame narrative, containing nested stories which are told by the cunning wife to her cruel husband king, who, hating womankind, normally kills a wife a day. The wife in question saves herself by telling a magical story each night, but never concluding it to force the king to let her live another day to hear the ending. Rather than the excitement produced at hearing each tale itself,

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<sup>338</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 186.

the main role of literature within the tale is its power to save. Likewise, Nothomb's love of literature provides her with a wealth of stories that help her understand her own pain, and keep living through it. 'Puisqu'il n y avait pas de nourriture, je décidai de manger tous les mots'; as a survival instinct to keep her soul and morale alive under the rule of anorexia, she reads the dictionary in its entirety (BF 168). She lists a series of books that she proceeds to devour, all of which shed some light on her current despair. 'Je lisais passionnément aussi la littérature concentrationnaire' (BF 171). Moreover, a sentence in the book echoes and confirms Nothomb's statement that literature saved her life: '[p]our ne pas perdre la cervelle, je retraduisis, avec fièvre, l'*Illiade* et l'*Odysée*. Je dois à Homère les quelques neurones qui me restent (BF 174). Interestingly, Margaret Topping stresses the significance of *Mille et Une Nuits*, but without referring to its potential symbolism in *Biographie de la faim*. Yet her argument is transferable: 'the protagonist, Amélie, tells stories in her mind in order to survive her symbolic disappearance within a corporation built on compliance and collective good.'<sup>339</sup> Topping is writing about the similarity between the oriental fairy tale and *Stupeur et tremblements*, but her point clearly resonates in the previous argument connected to her early childhood in *Biographie de la faim*. However, as Nothomb matures, so too does the role of *Mille et Une Nuits*, for there is a subtle change in its role in the two books. Where Nothomb first reads stories to save herself, she moves on to tell herself stories. This change is supported by Topping, who states, 'she will become a metaphorical Sheherazade, not a failed Ali-Baba, a storyteller not a character, active not passive.'<sup>340</sup> As she ages, literature plays a more significant, active, role in her life, as her need for literature grows in strength. I would suggest that as she relies more heavily on literature for salvation, she transfers more and more of her identity onto it. This is because she starts by reading books that she describes as 'miroirs à plaisir et à douleur' (BF 73) to her own self, and ends by writing stories which mirror her past battles and traumas. In an interview, Nothomb stresses, 'entre mes dix et mes vingt ans, la

<sup>339</sup> 'Orientalism and fairytale in Amélie Nothomb's autofictions', p. 92.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

littérature m’a vraiment sauvée du néant. [...] je me suis raccrochée aux livres comme à un radeau de sauvetage.’ In the same conversation she admits that her fictional tales contain metaphors which are revealing of her past: ‘[q]uand dans “Mercure” mon infirmière veut s’échapper de la chambre où l’a enfermée le capitaine, elle entasse des livres pour s’en servir comme d’un escabeau. C’est une métaphore de ma vie passée.’<sup>341</sup> But her autofictions are also affected, not with metaphors but by manipulation of language and structure. We have already seen the hyperbolic element to her writing that makes it fairy-tale like in the previous chapter, but there may be another underlying reason for it: being saved by her writing, Nothomb committed her life and identity to it,<sup>342</sup> and in becoming it displaced her anorexic and bulimic tendencies onto the text where they could do no harm.

Catherine Rodgers believes that ‘the body of Nothomb’s text corresponds to the anorexic ideal’, explaining this by adding, ‘she privileges fast-moving narratives with a good measure of dialogue, and few introspective digressive or descriptive passages. Her texts tend to be short and clipped, and her style as slight and as a lean, wiry body.’<sup>343</sup> She also writes that ‘the words ‘beau’, ‘beauté’ and their opposites punctuate her writing’<sup>344</sup> and that ‘in order to better draw attention to the beauty of certain characters, Nothomb flanks them with hideous individuals’.<sup>345</sup> This combination of a fast pace, punctuated with black and white opposites of exquisite beauty and nightmarish ugliness in fact seems more suggestive of a bulimic style of excess, as the bulimic hurriedly consumes everything without stopping to taste for detail before purging him- or herself

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<sup>341</sup> *Amélie Nothomb de A à Z*, p. 115.

<sup>342</sup> See *Les identités d’Amélie Nothomb*, p. 45: ‘la perception de Nothomb, même la personne physiquement rencontrée par des journalistes lors des interviews, est influencée par la concurrence de nombreux éléments imaginaires’. These elements are said to be the literary universe and fictional characters she creates, representations given by herself, Albin Michel, and other media sources. In Lee’s paper published in Bainbrigge and den Toonder’s *Amélie Nothomb: Authorship, Identity and Narrative Practice*, pp. 142-53, he writes about how Nothomb relives her childhood through her literature: literature becomes another reality for Nothomb, and there is great overlap between the truths of her fictional characters and her own identity.

<sup>343</sup> ‘Nothomb’s Anorexic Beauties’, p. 59.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

clean. Here Rodgers creates an interesting comparison and shows that anorectic and bulimic tendencies are found side by side in Nothomb's texts. Anna Kemp explains her interpretation of Nothomb's anorectic style by stating the following: 'writing, like anorexia, is described by Nothomb as the continuation of childhood by other means.'<sup>346</sup> She adds, 'but whereas Nothomb risked total self-destruction as an anorexic, as an author she is able to create herself as a unique persona both through her writing and her carefully created public image.'<sup>347</sup> While, according to the *NHS* website, both eating disorders can be ways of trying to cope and to control otherwise uncontrollable situations, bulimia is more common among those who have experienced abusive childhoods, whereas anorexia sufferers typically come from overprotective, demanding families which in turn sets up inhibition and perfectionism as common personality traits that fuel the illness.<sup>348</sup> This is reflected in Nothomb's fiercely controlled perfectionist style, as noted by Kemp. Kemp describes a 'godlike mastery of narrative' as Nothomb 'self-stages' herself as a literary character, all the while ruling over her 'fictional universe' as 'puppet master'.<sup>349</sup>

Mark Lee confirms Nothomb's self-construction, writing 'cette construction prendra plusieurs formes. De la mise en valeur de sa biographie à l'attention accordée à son corps de femme, de ses choix de [*sic*] vestimentaires et même alimentaires à sa nationalité...'<sup>350</sup> Literature becomes integral to her life, saving her first, and also replacing her former identity as she moulds a literary and public image of herself. She extends her fictional universe to her everyday life, as she describes her books as children, to which she gives birth after being pregnant: 'celle qui dit volontiers qu'elle n'enfantera pas [...] est la

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<sup>346</sup> Anna Kemp, 'The Self as Work of Art in Contemporary Women's Writing' in *A Decade of Women's Writing in France: Trends and Horizons 2000-2010 IGRS Conference* (14-16 October, 2010)

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> 'Causes of Anorexia Nervosa', *NHS Choices*

<<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anorexia-nervosa/Pages/Causes.aspx>> [accessed 10 June 2011], 'Causes of Bulimia', *NHS Choices* <<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bulimia/Pages/Causes.aspx>> [accessed 10 June 2011]

<sup>349</sup> 'The Self as Work of Art in Contemporary Women's Writing'

<sup>350</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, p. 26.

plus nourricière des mères en ce qui concerne la métaphore qui rapproche l'écriture et la maternité.<sup>351</sup> Zumkir adds, 'elle n'a encore jamais eu de fausse couche, tous ses bébés sont bel et bien nés.'<sup>352</sup> I see this as particularly revealing, as normally most associations with femininity and maturity are met by Nothomb with repulsion. Yet concerning literature, Nothomb assimilates maternal terminology with the utmost ease. This could be interpreted as showing the true significance of literature: she is born of it, inventing herself from a pastiche of fairy tales, references, and she also gives birth to it in the form of books. Nothomb states that writing, '[d]epuis 1992, c'est aussi mon moyen d'existence et ma seule activité. Il n'est pas exagéré de dire qu'écrire est toute ma vie.'<sup>353</sup> Her nationality is finally found: it is that of fiction.

The fusion of life and literature that takes place in the forming of her adult identity allows Nothomb to distance herself through *Métaphysique des tubes* from the psychological unease she felt when facing childhood's end. While she states that catharsis is not the intentional aim of her writing, she also acknowledges that it is one of its resulting outcomes: '[l]e but n'est pas la thérapie,' Nothomb states, 'mais quand même l'un des effets'.<sup>354</sup> In a different interview she adds, '[i]l y a un lien étrange entre anorexie et écriture. Je serais incapable d'expliquer comment mais je sais que j'ai fini par me sortir de mes problèmes alimentaires en écrivant.'<sup>355</sup> Barrie, too, returns to the same theme of childhood and its end, starting with *The Little White Bird* as noted in the introduction. This may also suggest that for him it provides a sense of catharsis, although it can only be an interpretation based on background knowledge of his life. Yet *Peter Pan* does not end in a particularly uplifting fashion either: just as Nothomb discovers she will lose all she loves, Peter loses his ideal child mother, the only one he could have kept without growing up. 'He had ecstasies

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<sup>351</sup> *Amélie Nothomb de A à Z*, p. 55.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>353</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: "Une apatride belge"?', p. 180.

<sup>354</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 194.

<sup>355</sup> Claire Julliard, 'Amélie Nothomb: Anorexique', *Bibliobs* (2010) <<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/print/21022>> [accessed 31 October 2010] (para. 5 of 13)

innumerable that other children can never know; but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever [*sic*] barred' (*PP* 191). As Gilead rightly states, 'the return does not bring stability but, rather, generates further losses and returns.' She describes these losses and returns as the following: '[t]he children lose their powers of flight, their belief in fantasy, as also, perhaps, their belief in the inviolability of childhood itself. Peter, forgetting the past, is entrapped in an eternal present without emotional or cognitive meaning.'<sup>356</sup> Perhaps, then, Barrie was also subconsciously trying to distance himself from a painful past, allowing him to deal with it more indirectly, like Nothomb, through 'd'autres moyens'.<sup>357</sup>

### 'Wendy-san' and 'Amélie Pan'

The theme of beastly masculinity and gender blur underpinning Nothomb and the carps was discussed in the previous chapter, but gender blur must be analysed from a different perspective when comparing *Métaphysique des tubes* to *Peter Pan*. The gender fluidity when comparing these two books is arguably predominantly linked to the author-protagonist relationship for reasons that will be outlined below, whereas in the previous chapter gender fluidity was integral to the content of the novel, symbolised markedly in the image of the carp. Taking a different approach in this chapter, the two themes emerge as the following: Nothomb as the young boy Peter Pan, Barrie as the deceased lady Mary Rose;<sup>358</sup> an intertextual descendant of Pan. Interestingly, these themes bear resemblance to an earlier point in the thesis, where it was noted that Nothomb's penchant for onomastics led her to distort and trouble gender by occasionally reassigning her characters names of the opposite sex.

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<sup>356</sup> 'Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction', p. 287.

<sup>357</sup> 'Writing Childhood's End', p. 142. Lee quotes Nothomb from an interview in which she highlights the importance that writing has on the continuation of childhood. He returns to this quote on several occasions, and makes it a pivotal term in his argument.

<sup>358</sup> This character is found in Barrie's *Mary Rose*, and will be situated in due course.

It would not be the first time that Nothomb compares herself as an author, rather than protagonist, to a masculine character in her fictional work, and although space does not allow an in-depth study of this here, the following quote given by Nothomb and referring to *Hygiène de l'assassin* is exemplary of this: 'je suis Prétextat Tach [...] c'est celui qui me ressemble le plus [...] sa relation avec Léopoldine, c'est tellement la mienne avec ma sœur: ma sœur et moi avons toutes les deux cessé de manger, et ma sœur n'a jamais recommencé à manger.'<sup>359</sup> Mark Lee also interestingly draws attention to the beginning of her literary career which also started with *Hygiène de l'assassin* in 1992, when she was mistaken for a man: [q]uoting Patrick Besson, Lee writes, '[j]'ai tout de suite pensé que c'était le livre d'un vieux monsieur [...] Amélie Nothomb est un vieux monsieur'. This unorthodox beginning becomes so striking that years later it forms the publicity slogan, slightly altered, for *Journal d'Hirondelle*: 'Amélie Nothomb est un homme dangereux.'<sup>360</sup> This confusion predates her literary career, as we see Nothomb reject masculinity through the repulsion she feels to carps and all that represents masculinity, but also rejects her own femininity, despite the beauty she associates with other females, as she later struggles to reach an asexual body in her battle against food. Pushing away a stable nationality and identity, she also denies herself a stable gender.

What is perhaps surprising is that Barrie, almost a century before *Métaphysique des tubes* was published, can be found to be making his own gender-asymmetrical comparison: he compares himself not to Peter, but a variant of him, found in the young girl and then deceased elderly lady, Mary Rose. Lurie writes, '*Mary Rose* is in many ways a sinister play, a final and darker version of *Peter Pan*.'<sup>361</sup> In the play Mary Rose vanishes on an island during a family vacation. Her parents believe she has drowned, but she reappears twenty days later unaware that time has passed. Although she remains childish, she marries and has a child, and it is when she fears that her child will grow up that she

<sup>359</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 190.

<sup>360</sup> *Les identités d'Amélie Nothomb*, pp. 21-2.

<sup>361</sup> *Not In Front of the Grown-ups*, pp. 154-5.



returns to the island, not to return from it until twenty-five years later. The play ends with her, a ghost, trapped and alone in her house. 'Mary Rose is also Barrie himself, ghostlike and ageless in a changed world – a world in which his parents are now dead and the little boys he loved have turned into strange and hateful young men.'<sup>362</sup>

Barrie upturns the notion of children's fantasy fiction, blurs gender through Peter's mimicry and his own need for self-discovery and forces the reader to ponder his or her own demise. Likewise, Nothomb defies literary classification, instead cramming every possible genre into each novel. She also creates a gender fluidity, also for her own self-understanding, and in writing *childhood's end* over and over, as Barrie also returns to the same theme of *Neverland*, Nothomb not only makes herself face past trauma, but insists her readers do also.<sup>363</sup> Consequently, her text bears remarkable resemblance to Barrie's. It could be too easily concluded that this cannot be so, as, unlike Peter, she does take children back to another world to fight pirates and save pretty little girls from ships. However, in a way, she does all of the above: she takes the reader back to her childhood, over and over again, allows us into her imagination to share the stories that she loved and upon which she based her style. Moreover she fights, conquers and saves herself through writing *childhood's end*. Nothomb is a contemporary Peter Pan, and her childhood can remain a *Neverland* to which, while dangerous during her adolescent years, she can, and does, return with ease.

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> This theory is based on the idea noted in ch. 2 that the adult, in re-reading fantasy fiction and fairy tales, even in fragments, are reminded of their own past

## Conclusion:

### Fairy tales and fantasy fiction: subversion and identity redefined

Jack Zipes remarks that 'it is impossible to grasp the history and the relationship of the fairy tale to myth without taking into consideration the manner in which tales have been manipulated, revised and duplicated either to reinforce dominant ideologies or to subvert them.'<sup>364</sup> Similarly, it would seem impossible to understand the relationship of the fairy tale and the fantasy genre to Nothomb's autobiographies and contemporary autobiographical novels without investigating her motives for opting to retell certain chapters of her life-story in this way. The previous sections of this thesis have shown how Nothomb redefines her identity by using characteristics of the fairy tale and fantasy genre to splinter her sense of place and self before reconstructing these fragments so that both Nothomb as author and as protagonist find their personal identity, including nationality and gender, in literature.<sup>365</sup> Where Nothomb's nationality was previously unanchored and her sense of gender unstable, her move towards a figurative identity intriguingly seems to resolve these two issues. However, Nothomb's author-protagonist identity appears to form one of two factors behind her choice to manipulate fairy and fantasy tales: although Jack Zipes is commenting in the above statement on the relationship of these genres to myth, the same comparison can also be made when relating fairy tales to autobiography, and I will now endeavour to show how the manipulation of fairy and fantasy tales provides Nothomb with the opportunity to comment on social and cultural norms in addition to her own personal identity. Furthermore, I will consider how successfully other literary designations which reinforce or subvert contemporary society and culture, such as postmodernist and feminist literature, can be applied to Nothomb's style of writing. While there are several further literary labels that comment on society to varying degrees, I have chosen to

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<sup>364</sup> Jack Zipes, 'They'll huff and they'll puff', *THE Culture*, 16 June 2011, pp. 45-46 (p. 46).

<sup>365</sup> See pp. 108-17 where I give reasons to consider Nothomb's nationality as belonging to fiction, to literature, as well as other aspects of her identity: she eats, breathes and lives literature.

focus on postmodernism and feminism as they have both previously been associated with Amélie Nothomb's writing for reasons that I shall shortly examine.

For Nothomb, from an early age, the requirements were set: fairy tales had to be exciting, not just at the beginning of the story, but throughout:

Les cas les plus flagrants étaient les contes de fées. Un fabuleux créateur d'histoires tirait du néant des commencements formidables : là où il n'y avait rien, il installait des mécaniques sublimes, des astuces narratives qui mettaient l'eau à la bouche de l'esprit. Il y avait des bottes de sept lieues, des citrouilles transformistes, des animaux pourvus d'une belle voix et d'un vocabulaire étendu, des robes couleur de lune, des crapauds qui se prétendaient princes. Et tout cela pour quoi ? Pour découvrir que le crapaud était réellement un prince et qu'il fallait donc l'épouser et avoir de lui beaucoup d'enfants (BF 23).

The above excerpt indicates through its disappointment in traditional fairy tales that the rewritings of these tales that Nothomb would produce in her collection for children, *Brillant comme une casserole*,<sup>366</sup> would share many elements of Angela Carter's tales, such as the manipulation of traditional fairy tale images and motifs into something controversial, comical and shocking. Fano's commentary on Nothomb's collection of fairy tales for children highlights a manipulation of the fairy tale so striking too in Carter's work: '[l]e ton est juste d'emblée: ça démarre de la façon la plus classique pour donner l'impression d'un air connu, et tout à coup, sans crier gare, on bifurque dans le burlesque, l'absurde, le grotesque.'<sup>367</sup> Full of comic ambiguity and irony, *Brillant comme une casserole* comments on gender and culture through reconstructing beauty in a way which is also apparent in Nothomb's adult autobiographical and autofictional work. An example of such commentary found in her collection of fairy tales for children can be seen in the following quote: '[c]'était [la Chine] un lieu d'une beauté si formidable que les visiteurs devaient porter des lunettes de

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<sup>366</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Brillant comme une casserole* (Brussels: Pierre d'Alun, 1999)

<sup>367</sup> Daniel Fano, 'Brillant comme une casserole'

<<http://membres.multimania.fr/fenrir/nothomb/brillant/htm>> [accessed 31 October 2010]

soleil pour le voir, car ses murs étaient recouverts de papier aluminium qui le faisait briller comme une casserole neuve.<sup>368</sup> This example also highlights some previously examined key leitmotifs to consider when analysing Nothomb's collection of texts; most notably beauty and ugliness and how their qualities are reversed. The description of China in *La Sabotage amoureux* similarly describes an extreme ugliness,<sup>369</sup> which the above quote alludes to through heavy sarcasm. Moreover the author's highly ambivalent and even disordered relationship to food is also lightly highlighted above by Nothomb's use of a culinary simile which is echoed closely in *Métaphysique des tubes*,<sup>370</sup> suggesting that something of extreme ugliness, such as China, can at once be appetising and repulsive. Although it is most apparent when comparing Nothomb's work to *La Belle et la Bête*, references to beauty and ugliness abound in every chapter of this study, and it is important to view each example not only in relation to Nothomb's identity as an author and a protagonist, but also in relation to how she may be commenting on values implemented and sustained by society, such as the pressure put on women to be thin and beautiful as well as the general fear or unacceptance of otherness. The significance that Nothomb attaches to beauty and ugliness, her subversion of the ideals of beauty through the ideation of the anorectic body and childlike form, as well as the sharp discord and confusion between attraction and repulsion that she establishes may all be suggestive of feminist literature, and this is a theory to which I shall return in due course. However, for similar and additional reasons her work has also been considered as postmodern, and this is an area which I would now like to explore and elaborate.

Andrea Oberhuber suggests that Amélie Nothomb's fairy tales for children, written in *Brillant comme une casserole*, as well as her adult literature

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<sup>368</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Légende peut-être un peu chinoise* (Brussels: Ministère de la Communauté française, 1998)

<[http://www.fureurdelire.cfwb.be/fileadmin/sites/fdl/upload/fdl\\_super\\_editor/fdl\\_editor/documents/publications/Amelie\\_Nothomb\\_\\_legende019.pdf](http://www.fureurdelire.cfwb.be/fileadmin/sites/fdl/upload/fdl_super_editor/fdl_editor/documents/publications/Amelie_Nothomb__legende019.pdf)> [accessed 10 January 2012] (p. 3 of 9)

<sup>369</sup> 'Dès le premier jour, j'avais compris l'axiome: dans la Cité des Ventilateurs, tout ce qui n'était pas splendide était hideux. Ce qui revient à dire que presque tout était hideux' (SA 5).

<sup>370</sup> 'Quand vient la mort, un couvercle géant se pose sur votre casserole crânienne' (MT 46).

contain elements of postmodernism, and explicitly defines Nothomb as a postmodernist writer.<sup>371</sup> Defining postmodernism is a task that would seem to go against the fundamentals of postmodernism itself, which often seeks to 'de-define art' and 'create a non-art or anti-art'.<sup>372</sup> Bacchilega considers postmodernism to have 'affected many of today's configurations of Western culture [...] especially literature, popular culture, and folklore'.<sup>373</sup> She believes one significant effect that postmodernism has had on modern society to be the challenging of contemporary norms or demands: 'postmodern studies have advocated anti-humanistic conceptualizations of the subject, played with multiplicity and performance in narrative, and struggled with the sexual and gender ramification of problematizing identities and differences.'<sup>374</sup> Favouring relativism over universal truth<sup>375</sup> postmodernism replaces metanarratives with micronarratives, 'swirling galaxies of little stories',<sup>376</sup> so that marginalized or controversial ideas can then 'temporarily overthrow[s] the hierarchy'.<sup>377</sup> However, postmodern literature does not confine itself to undermining metanarratives and commonly also undermines itself: 'it will make fun of itself [...] expose its own fictionality, expressly thwart all attempts at interpretation, deliberately refuse to answer all the questions it has posed, and so on',<sup>378</sup> therefore questioning not only universal truths, but also 'preconceived notions with regard to language, representation, the subject, and so on'.<sup>379</sup> This destabilisation of the subject and writing style is achieved, according to *The*

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<sup>371</sup> Andrea Oberhuber, 'Réécrire à l'ère du soupçon insidieux : Amélie Nothomb et le récit postmoderne', *Études françaises*, 40.1 (2004), p. 111-28 (p. 115).

<<http://www.erudit.org/revue/etudfr/2004/v40/n1/008479ar.pdf>> [accessed 15 June 2011]

<sup>372</sup> James N. Powel, *Postmodernism for Beginners* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Inc., 1998), p. 18.

<sup>373</sup> Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 19.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 16.

<sup>376</sup> *Postmodernism for Beginners*, p. 32.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>378</sup> Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2002, 2003), pp. 143-4.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

*Penguin Dictionary's* definition, through certain key features of the movement such as 'an eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody and pastiche'.<sup>380</sup> This definition is very close to Bacchilega's, who considers postmodern literature to be full of 'self-conscious contradictions, parodic intertextuality, and conflictual dialogue with historicity'.<sup>381</sup>

Although the above is a brief and highly simplified overview of the qualities of postmodern literature, it is already evident that if an author chooses to rewrite or deconstruct<sup>382</sup> certain tales, often the author's drive to do so stems from a desire to comment on society through literature, rather than for nostalgic idealisation.<sup>383</sup> Oberhuber provides a similar definition of postmodernism to the above description, explaining that postmodernist literature is at heart the rewriting of existing texts, through which 'les lecteurs assistent à la déconstruction, à des parodies, à la relecture suivie de réécritures ludiques des modèles antérieurs'.<sup>384</sup> It is this notion that Oberhuber focuses on when applying the postmodernist label to Nothomb, as she believes that Nothomb uses fairy and fantasy tale devices not only to influence or manipulate the author-protagonist identity, but also to ponder and question various elements of modern society. Oberhuber calls Nothomb the postmodern 'non-conformiste aimée du public',<sup>385</sup> and comments:

Si, dans *Stupeur et tremblements*, l'auteure se contente de tisser en filigrane sa toile de références bibliques et que, dans *Mercure*, elle se plaît à déconstruire

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<sup>380</sup> J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, rev. by C. E. Preston (First Published in G. B. by André Deutsch Ltd 1977; London: Penguin, 1999), p. 690.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>382</sup> Deconstruction is a notion established by Jacques Derrida that falls under the umbrella term of postmodernism and expresses the idea of overthrowing a metanarrative to create 'a play of binary opposites' through various techniques. See *Literary Theory: The Basics*, pp. 138-46; *Postmodernism for Beginners*, pp. 100-7; *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 16-25.

<sup>383</sup> Lorna Sage, 'Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale', in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, ed. by Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 65-82 (p. 66) (first publ. in *Marvels & Tales*, 12.1 (1998), 23-51). Calvino, to whom Carter compares herself, is quoted as believing that he was attracted to the medium of fairy tales not due to nostalgia, things relating to his childhood, escapism from the real world (all ideas associated with the traditional attractions of the genre) but for the style and structure that it contained, and the uses that flexibility that such fairy tale devices permitted.

<sup>384</sup> 'Réécrire à l'ère du soupçon insidieux: Amélie Nothomb et le récit postmoderne', p. 115.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

certaines mythes, contes de fées et autres idées reçues sur le 'féminin' et le 'masculin', l'enjeu de la réécriture s'avère plus complexe dans *Métaphysique des tubes*.<sup>386</sup>

She believes *Métaphysique des tubes* to be postmodern in its commentary on and interpretation of Genesis and the general presentation of God; a metanarrative which she controversially turns on its head to portray Him as the ultimate apathetic nihilist.<sup>387</sup> Yet while this is undoubtedly a key postmodernist aspect to the novel, I would suggest her reasoning for considering *Mercure* to be postmodern is also true for *Métaphysique des tubes*, which also succeeds in deconstructing and commenting on certain fairy tales and, through these, the female form. It is important to remember that Nothomb's autobiographical works are not first and foremost direct contemporary rewritings of fairy tales in the way that Angela Carter's stories are; yet by recounting her childhood with references to fairy tales, Nothomb's stories do to some degree become postmodern, fragmented and pastiche, contemporary rewritings of the original tales; offering opinions and commentaries on the role of women and beauty in a similar way to Carter.<sup>388</sup> We may also be encouraged to consider Nothomb's stories as postmodern representations of traditional fairy tales in light of Preston's remark that the postmodern fairy tale may be more subtle in its reference to magic: '[i]n postmodernity the "stuff" of fairy tales exists as fragments (princess, frog, slipper, commodity relations in a marriage market) in the nebulous realm that we might most simply identify as cultural knowledge.'<sup>389</sup> Nothomb's magical objects are brought to life by the imagination of the child protagonist in *Le Sabotage amoureux* as we see a bicycle become a horse, and we have also established in the third chapter of this thesis how everyday childhood hunts for sweets and chocolate acquire a magical and adventure-like

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid, pp. 120-1.

<sup>388</sup> This point will be clarified on pp. 127-9.

<sup>389</sup> Cathy Lynn Preston, 'Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale', *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. by Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State, 2004), pp. 197-212 (p. 210).

dimension.<sup>390</sup> Moreover, the way in which Nothomb as author occasionally undermines her stories through the revelation of their own fictionality is an additional reason to consider Nothomb as a postmodernist writer. This idea is expressed by Anna Kemp: 'I'd like to suggest that the ideal self that is staged *within* Nothomb's work is also enacted *through* the texts by Amélie Nothomb herself.'<sup>391</sup> She adds:

In the case of the two novels I have looked at today Nothomb makes two brief appearances in *Mercure* as the Elizabethan novelist Amelia Northumb and in a list of suicides discovered by Françoise at the police station, and in *Robert* she turns up in the closing pages to befriend Plectrude only to be shot dead by her own creation.<sup>392</sup>

Nothomb is clearly revealing the fictionality of her work by destabilising the reader and interrupting their reading experience by reminding them of its author.

Looking briefly at how Angela Carter adopts a postmodernist approach in her rewritings of fairy tales reveals a great deal of what Amélie Nothomb may be suggesting in her own work. Although Carter had been working on fairy tales throughout her career, Sage writes that it was from *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Sadeian Woman* that 'she explained herself, unpacked her gifts, played her own fairy godmother'.<sup>393</sup> These novels resulted from Carter's rereading of fairy tales and of Sade; stories and tales which lead her to 'bleakly contempl[ate] the fate of good, powerless girls, the Red Riding Hoods and Sleeping Beauties of the world'.<sup>394</sup> She believed that a substantial amount of fairy tales portrayed passive and powerless female characters;<sup>395</sup> characters which she would challenge

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<sup>390</sup> See pp. 44-7 for further examples of fairy tale language and objects found in Nothomb's autobiographical work and pp. 88-91 for examples of magical adventure and childhood imagination.

<sup>391</sup> 'The Self as Work of Art in Contemporary Women's Writing'

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> 'Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale', p. 66.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., p. 68. This notion was shared with Wanning Harries, who writes 'heroines who were passive, apparently dead or sleepwalking, dependent on the arrival of the prince for any animation and for entry into real life', in Elizabeth Wanning Harris, 'The Mirror Broken: Women's



through her own work: in this way she at once acknowledged that the de- and reconstructed elements of fairy tales made it possible to begin to subvert the oppression of women through the very genre that formerly reinforced it. This idea is suggested also by Wanning Harries, who argues that although not applicable to every contemporary author writing autobiographically with references to or using structural qualities of fairy tales, for some 'fairy tales have symbolic resonances that work against, or even contradict, the dominant models'.<sup>396</sup> While space does not permit an in-depth analysis of Carter's work, one point that Sage flags as significant is worth mentioning, as it resonates in Nothomb's autobiographical characters. Sage states that one leitmotif of Carter's fairy tales is found in characters that refuse to grow-up: '[i]n Carter's work the realist "rite of passage" plot about the young person's entry into the world is turned ironically back on itself: this heroine's refusal to grow up is clearly for Carter the most honest and telling thing about her'.<sup>397</sup> Sage explains that young females recurrently commit suicide or are killed in Carter's work, but suggests that the difference between the ways in which the females die is unimportant, for they are always 'living in the passive case'.<sup>398</sup> She later elaborates on other aspects of this group of stories, commenting on the mother-daughter or stepmother-daughter relationships, before concluding 'the young person's rite-of-passage story (which fairy tale and realist fiction have conspired together to tell since the eighteenth century) is to be shed and discarded like an old skin'.<sup>399</sup> It seems that Carter denounces the traditions of growing-up, the conventions that it imposed on young women of society, by killing them off before they can cross into adulthood, suspending the characters in a state of eternal youth as a result of their own or their mother's or step-mother's actions.<sup>400</sup> Interestingly, Sage also mentions the act of 'doubling and redoubling' of these types of

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Autobiography and Fairy Tales', in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. by Donald Haase (Detroit: Wayne State, 2004), pp. 99-111 (p. 103).

<sup>396</sup> 'The Mirror Broken: Women's Autobiography and Fairy Tales', p. 101.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, see pp. 74-5 for Sage's comparison of Carter's texts.

daughters and their mothers, a term which keeps reappearing through this thesis, which would suggest that repetition is an important element of postmodernist fairy tale writing: Carter is, I would suggest, forcing the reader to confront the issues by injecting the same themes and character types into her tales over and over.

Nothomb too uses this same method of repetition to kill off young female characters on several occasions in her fictions and autobiographical novels through one method or another. While several comparisons between Nothomb's works are possible, I have chosen to focus on comparing *Hygiène de l'assassin* with *Métaphysique des tubes* and *Biographie de la faim* in order to reveal or reconsider possible postmodernist ideas. This is because, as previously noted, *Hygiène de l'assassin* was the author's first published novel and becomes a prototype of her work: '*Hygiène de l'assassin* sets up a pattern to be followed in Nothomb's subsequent novels whose characters seem to reincarnate Prétextat Tach in various new forms.'<sup>401</sup> While the structure of *Hygiène de l'assassin* is that of an interview rather than a fairy tale like *Mercure*, the nested story that Prétextat Tach recounts in the novel bears striking resemblance to Carter's violent fairy tales. The study will focus on one possible postmodern topos which is also seen in Carter's work: the questioning of the female form.

One possibility that could help explain the violence and death found in both Carter's and Nothomb's work is suggested by Berglund Hill. She believes that Nothomb's characters function within a system which Hélène Cixous termed 'the masculine economy', which is defined by Berglund Hill as 'a system in which desire and violence are intricately linked', 'originating from gender inequality [...] stemming from the need to efface difference'.<sup>402</sup> She goes on to argue that for Nothomb's heterosexual couples this translates as the use of violence to preserve a relationship and halt its development by controlling the female in some way; for homosexual couples this translates as a violence which reduces

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<sup>401</sup> Elizabeth Berglund Hill, 'The violence of desire in Amelie Nothomb's novels', in *Women in French Studies*, 17 (2009), 103-15 (p. 106).

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., pp. 105, 103 respectively.

one female (interestingly Nothomb has no homosexual male couples in her work) to an emotionally dependent state. While this clearly links to problems of gender, studied in the second and third chapter of this thesis, what I am interested in at this point is why Nothomb's characters feel the need to preserve a relationship in the first place.

In *Hygiène de l'assassin*, Prétextat Tach's need to preserve his relationship with Léopoldine is easily explained: '[c]ertainly Prétextat's act of murder is associated with the idea that the sexually developed woman is impure. His 'hygiène d'éternelle enfance' and ultimately the murder of Léopoldine are efforts to purify and to maintain what he considers the purity of pre-pubescence.'<sup>403</sup> Yet his relationship with Léopoldine is controlling from the very beginning, and this attitude towards the female form explains why this is so. During the interview, when asked whether he is a feminist, Prétextat Tach scoffs at the mere suggestion, replying 'avez-vous déjà vu plus laid qu'une femme?' (HA 60). Women are ugly for their bodies ('[l]es femmes, c'est de la sale viande. Parfois, on dit d'une femme particulièrement laide qu'elle est un boudin: la vérité, c'est que toutes les femmes sont des boudins' (HA 62)) and for their nature ('vous frissonnerez d'horreur devant tant d'hypocrisie, de jalousie, de méchanceté, de bassesse' (HA 61)). Even the media's representation of the ideal female through magazine and catwalks do not impress him: '[q]ue dire de celles des vraies femelles, de celles qu'on n'ose pas montrer et qui sont l'immense majorité des mamelles? Pouah' (HA 62). But the true, revealing statement that he makes is the following: '[c]ertains enfants sont très beaux. Ça ne dure pas, hélas' (HA 62). This clarifies why, when he is aged fourteen and Léopoldine twelve, he makes her agree to a death pact: 'si l'un des deux trahit sa promesse et devient pubère, l'autre le tuera, purement et simplement' (HA 109). Adulthood, especially womanhood, is 'le pire des maux' (HA 109), but believed to be stoppable, if the body is deprived enough to become undernourished, deprived to an extent where it becomes unable to develop to puberty. Prétextat

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

believes that it is necessary to preserve the relationship, halt its development, because time brings the greatest threat of all: adulthood. Thus what his interviewer considers acts of violence, Tach considers acts of love. When he murders his cousin, Léopoldine, a year later as she enters puberty, he also believes he is acting out of love: 'Léopoldine était l'enfant la plus belle, [...] la plus enfantine, et ce uniquement grâce à moi. Grâce à moi, celle que j'aimais aura évité le calvaire de devenir une femme' (HA 112).

*Métaphysique des tubes* shows similar acts of preventative violence: the young protagonist tries to drown herself among the carps she despises, which, as previously noted, may represent the abject image of womanhood. Thus her suicide would also be her salvation from the departure from the utopian, beauty-filled childhood towards maturity and bodily development.<sup>404</sup> The act is seen less as a punishment, rather a total necessity on Nothomb's part, if it means she might not have to face the carps on a daily basis ('[j]e ne veux plus jamais nourrir les carpes!' (MT 154)). If the carp according to some critics symbolises the female form, then the female form is intolerable, repulsive, and in the same way as it is for Prétextat Tach, worth avoiding at all costs. The period of anorexia nervosa suffered by Nothomb and described in *Biographie de la faim* is also a variant of this idea. Berglund Hill states that 'this loathing of the body and obsession with food that most of Nothomb's characters display also reflects the desire to control the Other'.<sup>405</sup> She is here actually referring to *Hygiène de l'assassin*, but if we recall that Amélie is Tach ('je suis Prétextat Tach')<sup>406</sup> then this statement is not only applicable but enriched. In *Hygiène de l'assassin*, Tach and Léopoldine's behaviour is hugely suggestive of anorexia, as they restrict their food consumption heavily and swim excessively all in a bid to never grow up (HA 110-1). The theory that anorexia can form part of 'the masculine economy'<sup>407</sup> is deduced from the notion that 'the other may be another person (as for Prétextat

<sup>404</sup> See pp. 70-1 where I refer to Pries and Rodgers in relation to possible interpretations of the carps' role in the story.

<sup>405</sup> 'The violence of desire in Amélie Nothomb's novels', p. 109.

<sup>406</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', p. 190.

<sup>407</sup> See p. 128.

and Textor) or the *self* (as for Jérôme and the two Amélie)s [my emphasis]'.<sup>408</sup> She reaches this conclusion by referring to Catherine Rodgers's interpretations of Nothomb's characters: '[t]he disgust at the adult female body, the absence of genital sexuality, the ideal of thin, smooth and clearly contained childish body, even the need to control the Other and the absence of clear boundary between the self and other, all point to an anorexic sensibility.'<sup>409</sup> Interestingly, at the date of publication of Rodgers' paper (2003), *Biographie de la faim* had not been published and would not be until 2009 - yet her comments are echoed and clarified by the novel. This strengthens Rodgers' own theory that '*Métaphysique des tubes*, in disclosing the ambivalent role of food, shows us its construction [anorexic sensibility], possibly in the life of Nothomb herself if this text is to be taken as in any way autobiographical'.<sup>410</sup>

Variants of anorectic idealisation are visible in Nothomb's novels, with anorexia nervosa in *Biographie de la faim*, anorexia induced in both the self and the other in *Hygiène de l'assassin*, and the allusion to anorexic sensibility in *Métaphysique des tubes*. Furthermore, all three novels attach great importance to the desire for beauty and refusal of ugliness. In the second chapter we saw how the fairy tale plays an important role not only in the development of a child's identity, but also in the development of an adult's, as he or she is able to recollect or reconstruct past events or traumas through the fairy tale, and tap into his or her unconscious.<sup>411</sup> Thus the fairy tale becomes a sort of psychotherapeutic aid. Wanning Harries supports this notion in stating that 'fairy tales provide scripts for living, but they can also inspire resistance to those scripts and, in turn, to other predetermined patterns'.<sup>412</sup> While acknowledging other roles that the fairy tale can assume, she also elaborates on the first point of her statement, explaining that fairy tales are sometimes pastiched in modern autobiography to distance the author from painful pasts: '[t]he meaningful

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>409</sup> 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 58.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> See *The Beast in the Nursery*, p. 7, and *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 6.

<sup>412</sup> 'The Mirror Broken: Women's Autobiography and Fairy Tales', p. 103.

fragments of fairy tales can only suggest some of those nearly inexpressible secrets.’<sup>413</sup> She constructs a metaphor which compares contemporary autobiography to a broken, fragmented mirror: ‘[f]ractured identities demand fractured forms, a momentary self glimpsed in a remembered scene – or in a fragment of a fairy tale.’<sup>414</sup>

While the recurrent theme of anorexia may indeed help Nothomb deal with her own spell of the illness, it may also comment, in postmodernist fashion, on ideals of beauty, the media’s role in the portrayal of these ideals as norm and the possible connection between this normalisation with the increase in eating disorders in contemporary society. Kobialka suggests that the theme of anorexia falls into and relates to a more general category, stating ‘[u]ne des questions importantes dans l’œuvre d’Amélie Nothomb est celle de l’image de la féminité socioculturelle’.<sup>415</sup> Following a reading of Bordo on anorexia, who sees the illness as resulting from cultural conventions, Kobialka believes that Nothomb’s reference to it may comment on the role of the passive female: ‘les jeunes filles ont peur de répéter le style de vie de leurs mères frustrées et concentrées sur le foyer familial.’<sup>416</sup> While this interpretation may indeed be a possibility, the definition does imply that males cannot suffer from the illness. Kobialka also suggest that the representation of anorexia in relation to beauty, i.e. the need for Nothomb’s characters to stay beautiful children (induce anorexia) to avoid the ugliness of the adult female form, allows Nothomb to question an unjust social requirement: ‘[e]lle se demande pourquoi dans la mentalité sociale [...] pour les femmes on met surtout l’accent sur l’aspect physique [...] les femmes évaluent leur aspect physique avec les yeux de l’observateur masculin intériorisé.’<sup>417</sup> Could she be suggesting society’s expectations for female beauty are so high that they are unattainable? The extreme murder of Léopoldine could

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>415</sup> Margaux Kobialka, *La création d’Amélie Nothomb à travers la psychanalyse* (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2004), p. 55.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

be interpreted as a kind act by Tach, because the ideal, beautiful woman that the media portrays is a distorted, photo-shopped lie; a creation of the imagination. Léopoldine would never achieve such beauty again; better to die satisfied than to live feeling unwavering inadequacy, Tach (Amélie) would imply.

Nothomb, when questioned about the significance of obesity and anorexia in her books, replies, '[j]'admire le pouvoir d'opacité de l'obèse dans un monde où règne une idéologie de la transparence... L'anorexie, évidemment, c'est du vécu. Mais tous les anorexiques vous le diront: c'est fou ce qu'on se sent proches des obèses.'<sup>418</sup> Although she highlights the personal element to the theme, she also confirms indirectly her postmodernist discussion of society's privileging of beauty. This statement also casts the image of the obese beast as seen in second chapter of this thesis in a new light: Nothomb may challenge society's prejudice of and discrimination towards the obese by incarnating these prejudices in an extreme form in her characters. As analysed previously, the obese Tach is beastly, lazy and repulsive: his obesity is provoked by his own disgusting greed, rather than connected to past trauma and malaise. Obesity is addressed more directly in Nothomb's *Une forme de vie*.<sup>419</sup> The book contains a series of letter exchanges between a fictional soldier in Bagdad, Melvin Mapple, and Amélie Nothomb. The majority of letters sent to Nothomb by Mapple concern his obesity and depression and portray the soldier as a deeply tragic, rather than beastly, character. 'On est fou. Quelque chose est cassé en nous. [...] on pourrait se tuer de nourriture, c'est peut-être ce qu'on cherche' (FV 28). The notion that obesity may be a form of suicide is expressed at several other points in the tale, emphasising that obesity is not caused by greed, rather by despair: '[i]l faut manger pour vivre, paraît-il. Nous, nous mangeons pour mourir. C'est le seul suicide à notre disposition' (FV 38). This 'boulimique incapable de vomir' (FV 30) has eaten in excess as a form of torture, rather than to distance himself from the shame and sadness he feels as a result of the deaths he has caused as a

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<sup>418</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb: Anorexique', para. 5 of 13.

<sup>419</sup> Amélie Nothomb, *Une forme de vie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010): all subsequent references to the text will appear as FV followed by the page number.

soldier: '[p]eut-être la graisse est-elle le moyen que j'ai trouvé pour inscrire dans mon corps ce mal que j'ai fait et que je ne sens pas' (FV 63). The quotations taken from *Une forme de vie* support the idea that the 'obese beasts' previously analysed may indeed not be inherently beastly but rather voice her views on the realities, rather than prejudices, of obesity. This is because the repetition of the theme of obesity emphasises its importance to Nothomb as a writer, and the direct treatment of obesity as a topic in *Une forme de vie* indicates that the same topic may be treated indirectly in her other novels. In the second chapter I wrote that obesity made a character beastly in part due to Nothomb's former adolescent prejudices that were fuelled by a different and all-consuming beast, anorexia nervosa. Nothomb expressed that as an anorexic she felt shockingly close to somebody suffering from obesity, which is emphasised again by a further statement that anorexia and obesity is 'la même pathologie inversée, liée à une même impossibilité d'assumer le corps'.<sup>420</sup> It is unsurprising then, that both anorexia and obesity are manifest in her writing. Her first-hand experience with anorexia may strengthen her desire to question society's views on beauty and obesity, using her writing as a tool to achieve this. The notion that her references to beauty, anorexia and obesity may not merely serve as a cathartic element in her literature is reinforced in another interview, where Nothomb states:

Aujourd'hui, il existe un phénomène de masse, un culte de la maigreur, de la ligne. La jeune fille anorexique serait en quelque sorte le bouc émissaire de nos excès sociaux. Regardez en Amérique, la surconsommation, l'obésité qu'on voit partout, ces personnes anorexiques seraient un peu l'excuse de la société. Nous produisons des obèses, mais nous avons aussi produit ces espèces de squelettes, qui font partie du système économique de la mode.<sup>421</sup>

It would seem that, through her work, Nothomb subverts the social expectations and cultural pressures put onto the contemporary woman. Following in Carter's

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> 'Amélie Nothomb. L'enfance à en mourir', (found in 'A TREIZE ANS, AVOIR DES SEINS, QUELLE HORREUR!')



footsteps, Nothomb deconstructs, reconstructs, and pastiches former fairy tales in the name of postmodernism. Yet I would suggest that Nothomb uses two separate images to comment on beauty and the woman: the first falls firmly into Carter's performative, shocking fairy-tale-like method and is that of preventative violence performed by characters within the tales on either themselves or others to halt bodily maturation. The second is slightly more ambiguous and is the almost omnipresence of beauty in Nothomb's work: the repeated image of the angelic, serene and beautiful child, and beauty in general, might first appear to reinforce, rather than subvert, the ideals of beauty. But this need for beauty may be interpreted as a by-product of Nothomb's 'anorexic sensibility',<sup>422</sup> initiated by the beauty of Japan contrasting with the ugliness of China: Nothomb explains that 'ces chocs esthétiques ont certainement eu un impact sur ma pensée et ma vision du monde. Même une conception de la vie comme une traverse de l'horreur, ponctuée d'émerveillements; et d'une nostalgie d'une beauté première à retrouver'.<sup>423</sup> When I ask her why she mixes and confuses the qualities of beauty and ugliness, she replies by confirming her belief that 'la beauté trouve son sens en partie grâce à la laideur':<sup>424</sup> indirect comments on Japan, beauty, and beauty ideals become intertwined and strengthen the case for a postmodern reading of the text for their ability to indirectly question social and cultural values placed on aesthetics.

A statement that summarises all the possibilities of Nothomb's use of fairy tale and fantasy fiction in her autobiographical work is provided by Wanning Harries. While she refers not to Nothomb but to Christia Wolf's German autobiographical text, I would suggest that it is also true for Amélie Nothomb:

Shattering the typical practices of conventional autobiography, she also breaks fairy tale into parts. Just as her text becomes a collage of scenes and thoughts from different eras of her life, a "novel" rather than an "autobiography", so the

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<sup>422</sup> 'Nothomb's Anorexic Beauties', p. 58.

<sup>423</sup> 'Interview with Amélie Nothomb', pp. 204-6.

<sup>424</sup> Private correspondence with Amanda Thomas, p. 1.

fairy tales she remembers are fragmented and woven apparently at random into her text. They do not have the compelling force of coherent myths but rather provide scattered models for resistance and for interpretation.<sup>425</sup>

Various elements of postmodern literature are highlighted in this statement: the deconstruction of fairy tales, their apparently random reconstruction and the quality that they attain, the process of being resistant to previous models and their choice of questioning and interpreting rather than answering. Perhaps we ought to consider Nothomb as a postmodern writer if we consider the style and content of her texts, or as a feminist writer for the questions of feminine aesthetics that she challenges in her work. At the start of this thesis it appeared that I had set myself the task of finding a suitable category for Amélie Nothomb's autobiographically-rooted books. I questioned whether they fit into the categories of autobiography, autofiction, autobiographical novel, autobiographical fairy tale, and autobiographical fantasy tale and later whether, if any of the above, they are postmodern or feminist. I wanted to show that trying to categorise Nothomb's writing reduces the beauty and pleasurable complexity of her work. This theory is voiced by Riffaterre, who states that explanations in literature are problematic because they consist of generalizations that 'tend[s] to keep the reader from seeing the uniqueness from which [they] stem[s]'.<sup>426</sup> He argues that explaining literature with categorisations and generalisations encourage the reader's inherent resistance to the text, 'reduc[ing] everything that is strange to something known and familiar.'<sup>427</sup> He believes that the role of the reader is vital in literary communication and that '*all of the reader's possible reactions to the text [sic]*'<sup>428</sup> are valuable to literary explanation, rather than one generalisation. He argues this point because he believes communication to be a game, encoded by the author and his or her intentions

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<sup>425</sup> 'The Mirror Broken: Women's Autobiography and Fairy Tales', p. 104.

<sup>426</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production*, trans. by Terese Lyons (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 2.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

and decoded by the reader<sup>429</sup> according to the reader's perceptions. The potential discord between the author's intent and the reader's perception causes a level of ambiguity to arise in literary explanation, which is certainly present in studies of Nothomb, established by the various literary categories spoken of by critics and readers in relation to her novels.

The ambiguity, which the explanation must keep from destroying, is not the result of a faulty reading or a lack of understanding that can vary with the readers. It is in the text: it simultaneously encodes the evidence that several interpretations are possible and that making a choice among them is impossible.<sup>430</sup>

Amélie Nothomb's *Métaphysique des tubes*, and writing in general, should not be restricted to one literary genre. Critics have interpreted Nothomb's work as belonging to various genres not erroneously, but because elements of each genre are apparent in her novels. Riffaterre warns us in the statement above from making generalisations to erase ambiguities for ease in literature, trying to 'tam[e] a work'<sup>431</sup> which becomes richer and more meaningful precisely when left untamed.

Amélie's sister, Juliette, published a book of unusual and at times disturbing recipes, *La cuisine d'Amélie: 80 recettes de derrière les fagots*, in honour of Amélie's eclectic 'sensualité gourmande'.<sup>432</sup> It could be interpreted as a parody of Amélie's writing style, indirectly highlighted by Juliette as she writes the following in her preface to the collection:

[...] la cuisine est avant tout un jeu [...] Quel plus grand bonheur pour un cuistot que de se voir livrer un panier plein d'ingrédients imprévus, et de se dire, "Qu'est-ce que je vais bien pouvoir créer avec ça..." [...] Autrement dit, fuyez la

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., p. 283, fn. 7: '[l]eaving aside the element of *contact*, the elements comprising the communication act are: the **encoder** (the author in the case of literary communication), message (text), **decoder** (reader), code (language), and context (reality) [my emphasis].'

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>432</sup> Juliette Nothomb, *La cuisine d'Amélie: 80 recettes de derrière les fagots* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), p. 9.

fadeur et l'ennui, bannissez tabous ou diktats culinaires. Bref, faites votre cuisine.<sup>433</sup>

'Amélie Nothomb est Amélie Nothomb, et voilà près de vingt ans qu'elle participe au festin automnal':<sup>434</sup> an 'immutable best-seller',<sup>435</sup> Nothomb is attributed her own name to describe her style in an article found in *L'Express*, supporting the idea that she transgresses definitions of genre and creates her own idiosyncratic recipe for success. However what is certain is that both fairy tale and fantasy fiction are key ingredients in her recipe and are used time and time again. As result of reading the autofictional *Mercure*, perhaps the richest of Nothomb's reworkings of fairy tales, Bainbrigge states that we are 'jolted out of our complacency' and taken by Nothomb 'on a voyage of rediscovery'.<sup>436</sup> This is perhaps the quality I appreciate most in Nothomb's style: by pastiching various tales and introducing high levels of intertextuality, Nothomb unravels traditional stories and by doing so cultural norms and ideals. She then refashions them to force the reader into viewing them in a new and unusual light, 'mak[ing] us reflect upon the role of literature in our lives, upon the ways in which we interact with others, the limits to which we can be driven in our intersubjective experiences, and finally, how we mask and unmask ourselves in the worlds we inhabit.'<sup>437</sup> I asked Nothomb whether she actively rewrites fairy tales into her fictions, to which she replied that she did, before adding a slight Nothombian paradox: '[c]ela se fait tout seul: les contes sont une grille de lecture indispensable de nos vies.'<sup>438</sup> Writing and literature are so integral, vital even, to her life that Nothomb both consciously and unconsciously integrates, de- and reconstructs various stories and techniques into her work to create her own writing style. Intertextuality and how this is conveyed adds a richness to her work,

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., preface.

<sup>434</sup> Marianne Payot, 'La rentrée littéraire envahit le palmarès', *L'Express* (26.08.2011) <[http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/la-rentree-litteraire-envahit-le-palmares\\_1024289.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/la-rentree-litteraire-envahit-le-palmares_1024289.html)> [accessed 1 October 2011] (para. 2 of 5)

<sup>435</sup> Ibid. (in caption found under main photo of article)

<sup>436</sup> "'Monter l'escalier anachronique": Intertextuality in *Mercure*', both p. 122.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>438</sup> Private correspondence with Amanda Thomas, p. 1.

as Bainbrigge expresses in her study of *Mercure*: 'reworking familiar tales is not stifling to her creativity but unleashes it.'<sup>439</sup> Cautious not to limit herself to one literary style, Nothomb successfully defies one clear-cut classification, enthusiastically pick'n'mixing, as if a child once more stood before an array of colourful sweets, elements of all of these genres, sub-genres and movements: the result is always intriguing, often best-selling, occasionally controversial and never easily defined.

Word Count: 49,264

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<sup>439</sup> "'Monter l'escalier anachronique": Intertextuality in *Mercure*', p. 122.

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