

Anamnesis and Utopia: Nietzschean Self-Portraiture in Marie-Thérèse Humbert's *A l'autre bout de moi*

Must I still seek the last happiness on blessed
isles and far away between forgotten seas? But
all is the same, nothing is worth while, no seek-
ing avails, nor are there any blessed isles any
more.
Thus Spoke Zarathustra IV

For it is man who creates for himself the image
of woman, and woman forms herself according
to this image. *The Gay Science* II: #68

La dialectique de la langue est dialectophage.
Derrida, *Glas*

From Plato's Atlantis to Michel Tournier's *Speranza*, islands have been a topos, a rhetorical device used by writers to create a fictional environment, to inspire a visionary or romantic imagination. Since Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) the myth of an idyllic place, where a new vision can take shape and a new order be developed, has often been linked to the idea of islands: the *ou-topia* being that nonexistent topos, the perfect (*eu-topia*) island. Writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Swift, Defoe, Rousseau, Bernardin de St-Pierre, Samuel Butler, George Sand and Aldous Huxley have used the concept for satirical as well as mythical purposes.

For Bernardin de St-Pierre, the inspiration stemmed from the discovery of a real island and subsequent travel there: *Paul et Virginie* takes place in Mauritius (or Isle de France as it was then called, now known as Ile Maurice). George Sand's *Indiana*, on the other hand, was inspired by the journals of her Berrichon friend, Jules Néraud, who had traveled extensively to the French islands of the Indian Ocean: Madagascar, Mauritius and Reunion (then known as Ile Bourbon, the setting of *Indiana*). Real or fictional, islands have been the objects of many

mythologies, creations of the romances and fantasies of the (mostly male) European literary imagination since the time of Plato.

It is in that sense that islands are like women: their realities are masked behind the social and political constructs of history, the tales and legends of the first explorers and their contemporaries. The mythologizing of islands took on new dimensions with the Renaissance seafaring explorations, which marked the beginning of the European colonial era. The island colonies were in turn visited, settled, traded as pawns in the game of colonialist expansion, and finally abandoned by the various colonial powers as a result of the wars they waged and the treaties they signed with each other. The numerous name changes of the colonies amply testify to the plurality of their political affiliations, becoming a kind of palimpsest of their multiple identities. Today, the masking continues even more thoroughly with the advent of mass tourism. Colorful travel brochures about 'tropical paradises' are the staple of our winter dreams in snowbound Paris or New York. The Club Med myth of 'sun-sex-sand'¹ is alive and well in Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mauritius, Reunion or Tahiti. One of the slogans the Club Méditerranée has used to advertise itself, 'the antidote to civilisation,' is a phrase which would certainly have amused Nietzsche, who claims, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (#197: 109),² that 'tropical man' is indeed the antidote to 'moral' or 'temperate' man, that is, 'civilized' man.

For Nietzsche, 'tropical' man is 'natural' man, but not in the sense of Rousseau's 'bon sauvage,' who represents a return to the original goodness of an innately moral 'natural man.' Nietzsche's 'tropical man' is sheer vitality and power: he is the one who can transcend morality, in order to live beyond, or on the margins of democratic, liberal society, which is but the triumph of 'herd-animalization' (*TI*: 541). This tropical man, according to Nietzsche, has been fundamentally misunderstood by the mediocre and the moralists: they see in him only the projection of their own inner state of morbidity, a product of Judeo-Christian beliefs and attitudes (e.g. *BGE* #197: 109; *A* #15: 581). The

1 The phrase is from an article of the periodical *L'Express*, reprinted in *L'Express: Ainsi va la France*, texts selected by Ross Steele and Jacqueline Gaillard (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company 1984) 90.

2 All references to Nietzsche's works will be given in the text, using the following abbreviations: *BGE*: *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage Books 1966); *A*: *The Antichrist*; *TI*: *Twilight of the Idols*; and *Z*: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *TPN*: *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press 1954); *OGM*: *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books 1969); *GS*: *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books 1974). All translations by Walter Kaufmann.

moralists are those, like the timid and the weak, who have been subjected to the influence of culture, the violent *dressage* of the mind which is constitutive of the 'disease' of civilization. For the prophet Zarathustra, who celebrates laughter and wanders through islands, those moralists are the 'good,' the 'pharisees' who must be overcome by the creators of new values (Z III: 324). In his search for new values, Zarathustra visits his 'blessed isles,' which include the 'isle of tombs' where he looks back on his past and on the 'murdered' visions of his youth (Z II: 223), and the 'isle of fire,' a volcanic island where he expounds on the earth's 'skin diseases,' 'man' and the 'fire hound' (Z II: 242).

Using Nietzsche's insights into the repressive influence of Western culture and adopting many of his metaphors, Marie-Thérèse Humbert proceeds, in *A l'autre bout de moi*,³ to deconstruct the utopias and centers of desire of Western imagination, its mythologies about tropical islands and about women. Born and raised in Mauritius (which is a tropical, volcanic island), she writes about her youth, her past and her country. This necessarily means confronting images both of women and of islands and unmasking the realities behind centuries of rhetoric. Her work exposes the debilitating myths that obscure the unpleasant facts of life in any colonial environment with its rigidly defined social roles. As we shall see, she proposes a demystification of those myths while attempting to create another kind of utopia: one where the island is no longer a construct, a spectacle and an object of male imagination, but becomes the paradigm for a polysemic female subject who speaks up and discloses the conflicts and contradictions of her historical situation. Her work seems to answer – *avant la lettre* – the questions formulated by Alice Jardine in her recent (1985) book *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Jardine concludes by asking:

Are there not ways in which feminism, as concept and practice, might be productively redefined in light of the new conceptual paths cleared by the texts of modernity? Do those paths not offer new directions with which women can link up with other minorities within and against the dominant Western conceptual systems?⁴

In a footnote to that passage, Jardine adds: 'I use the word "minorities" here in the Deleuzian sense – i.e., those who are fighting for their survival under the majority rule of the Western-white-male-

heterosexual-adult.' As a Creole woman writer, a *professeur de lettres* and a mother of five, Humbert stands at the intersections of those dominant conceptual systems with the 'real world' problems of colonialism, racism and sexism. As I shall make clear by using Deleuzian and Derridian readings of Nietzsche, her autobiographical narrative dramatizes the process of becoming 'woman' and 'maternal,' that is, the process of becoming a *writer*.

To understand the scope of her work, one needs to be briefly acquainted with the history of Mauritius. The island was known to Arab sailors ever since the Middle Ages, but it had no native population. The first Europeans to discover it were the Portuguese, in 1510. They left and were followed by the Dutch, who remained on the island from 1598 till 1710. The Dutch named the island Mauritius in honor of Prince Maurice of Nassau, but their settlement was never prosperous and they abandoned it after having ruthlessly exploited the forests of ebony trees and exterminated the dodo bird. The French then took over the island in 1715, renaming it *Isle de France*, and it became a prosperous colony. A century of French rule has left an indelible mark and, to this day, the *lingua franca* of the island is a French Creole dialect. In 1814, the Treaty of Paris ceded the island to the British, who renamed it Mauritius. The conditions of this cession stipulated that the language, religion and customs of the Francophone population be safeguarded, and they were. Independent since 1968, the island is peopled with the descendants of the French settlers and their black slaves; the Indian indentured laborers who came to work the sugar cane fields after slavery was abolished in 1835; the Chinese and Muslim shopkeepers; and a sizable *métis* population.

Located in the Indian Ocean, far from any continent, Mauritius was nonetheless visited, and written about, by famous men: Bernardin de St-Pierre, Darwin, Baudelaire, Conrad, Mark Twain, Gandhi and V.S. Naipaul, to name a few. The latter termed it 'the overcrowded barcoon' in an essay of that name: Mauritius has a population of more than a million in a geographical area of 720 square miles. Although quite isolated, it has become a paradise retreat and an ideal vacation spot for the international jet set. The luxury hotels they frequent provide employment to some, but most of all, they help perpetuate the myths and fantasies which the people of the island entertain about themselves and about the rest of the world: that the island is a privileged place which attracts the rich and the famous; that the rest of the world is somehow well represented in the foreigners who do come there.

That is the geopolitical reality of Mauritius, the background to keep in mind when reading *A l'autre bout de moi*. Published in 1979 as a nov-

3 (Paris: Éditions Stock 1979). All further references will be given in the text.

4 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1985) 258

el, it is a first-person narrative and a kind of schizophrenic self-portrait, the story of a *dédoublément*. Its main protagonists are twin sisters, Anne and Nadège Morin, who figure as a two-faced, Janus-like, incarnation of the author herself. Like Janus, the Roman God of Gates, Humbert's narrator – and by extension, her island – stands at the crossroads, with one face looking to the East and the other to the West. The narrative is the sisters' story as well as the story of Mauritius and of its diverse ethnic groups. It ends on the utopian vision of Anne, the Catholic, *métis* narrator, and her Indian lover-to-be, Aunauth Gopaul, as the mixed race couple who might perhaps harmonize East and West and live beyond the racial prejudices of the island:

Si j'avais des enfants, ce que j'espérais, ils pourraient y revenir ... ils réveraient en contemplant l'Ange Gabriel et Vichnou, qui auraient recommencé à se sourire dans un paradis de verre. (p. 462)

Anne is referring here to the Chinese shopkeeper's store window, a recurring topos of the narrative. Thematically, it is a matrix for the major metaphors of the text. With its bric-à-brac of incongruous objects, the shop is a magical place for the twin sisters and a haven of cultural diversity:

Des statuettes de la Vierge y côtoient de gros Bouddhas bienveillants. Çava même, parfois, étend là ses multiples bras, comme s'essayant à la pose qui conviendrait le mieux à sa dignité, ou Vichnou, endormi sur son serpent, se préparait à l'un de ses incroyables avatars, tandis que saint Georges, cuirassé de cottes de mailles, terrassait un dragon dont la langue rouge et fourchue soufflait le feu. Que de merveilles pour des enfants que la fortune n'a pas gâtées! (p. 62)

Christian and Oriental symbols tolerantly coexist in this 'paradise' which knows no hierarchies. It is the narrator's metaphor for a unique, but idealized, microcosm: the multicultural society of Mauritius, a paradoxical country which manages to survive the political storms of history by combining opposite tendencies and allowing them to thrive, while finding for itself 'une étrange assise soutenue de vents contraires' (p. 370). Such a view is part reality, part myth-making, the kind of utopian vision that can inspire a sense of positive belonging to the inhabitants of that microcosm, since '[u]topia, in a non-mystical, secular society, has almost the status of religion – the one source of the myths of the ends of life.'⁵

5 Robert F. Sayre, 'Autobiography and Images of Utopia,' *Salmagundi* 19 (Spring 1972) 18-37 (at p. 19)

The narrative incorporates the personal history, the self-portraits of the various protagonists: the members of Anne's *métis* family, the Morins; Mme Marget, the dutiful bigot; Lydia, the abortionist; the Indians, Sassita (the servant) and Aunauth Gopaul (the politician); the white boy friend, Pierre; and the French Marxist doctor, Paul Roux, whose utopian political theorizing is the ferment, the catalyst that eventually enables Anne to imagine a different future. The embedded self-portraits of these characters are narrated directly or indirectly in Anne's text. By allowing their heterogeneous discourses to take center stage, the author encodes diversity within the narrative text, giving the reader an inside and very private view of those who are normally ignored or silenced by official, public history. Each of the characters is placed in the position of (unreliable) narrator whose perspective on the others proves to be limited and incomplete. But when brought together in the narrative, these points of view provide 'une série de tableaux très courts, significatifs mais disparates' (p. 239), a multifaceted picture of reality in that microcosm.

Ostensibly, Anne writes and recreates past events in an attempt to understand both her socio-cultural situation, as mediated by the chorus of voices emerging in her memory, and to examine her choices for the future. Consequently, her recollections are inseparable from an ultimate visionary dimension, for, as Robert F. Sayre says, 'there is no new image of the future without a corresponding new image of the individual, including [her] image of [her] past' (Sayre, p. 20). In this case, the individual's image of her past is by no means static. It is a series of kaleidoscopic vignettes which are allowed to interface and interact. Put another way, the narrator's past is 'a locus of cross-references ... [and] differential perceptions': it is a relational construct derived from 'a given element[s] ... *différence* from other elements, and ultimately from an implicit comparison of it with its own opposite.'⁶ This quotation from Fredric Jameson, who thus summarizes the concept of binary oppositions as used in the structuralist method, aptly describes Humbert's technique: her text incorporates the use of a series of contrasting elements; aspects of one culture echo those of another, and characters tend to be paired off into couples which are mirror images, opposites of each other (the twin sisters, the mother and Sassita, Paul Roux and Aunauth Gopaul, the father Philippe and his brother André, etc.). Furthermore, these sets of pairs exist in homologous, but polyvalent relationships with each other. It is from the interaction of these doubles

6 Fredric Jameson, 'Metacommentary,' *PMLA* 86:1 (Jan. 1971) 9-18 (at p. 14)

and the new pairs they generate (Anne and her mother, Nadège and Sassita, Anne and André, Nadège and Philippe, Anne and Paul, Nadège and Aunauth, etc.) that a changing, but progressively conclusive, picture of the past can begin to emerge.

To summarize briefly, the main plot is the following: twin sisters, Anne and Nadège live in a house on the outskirts of the vast colonial domains of the white bourgeoisie and a short distance away from the Hindu quarter ('une maison à part, une maison frontière, sans attaches et sans parenté' (p. 17), a metaphor for their racial and cultural contexts). Coming of age in the 50s, the decade preceding independence, the sisters are set on a collision course, for they choose to be loyal to different traditions; Nadège gleefully accepts her *métissage*: she is chameleon-like, adventurous, imaginative, interested in Hindu culture and religion as well as popular superstitions; she is a free spirit, at once the Ariel and the Caliban of this 'enchant'd isle,' full of humor, impossible to define and constantly changing. She is the favored daughter of the family and she has an affair with the young Indian politician: two reasons to incur the wrath of Anne, the controlled, reasonable, calculating one, whose rigid efforts at respectability include the romantic hopes of a bourgeois marriage, like the heroines of the romances she reads. These hopes are thwarted by Nadège's pregnancy because in Anne's world of almost-white-but-not-quite, any wrong step can be the first on the road back to further ostracism by the Whites. Hence the murderous hatred she unleashes when Nadège proudly announces her condition. She tells her why she has always resented her, she shouts her contempt and her fury, disclosing her own profound distress. So, as an act of love for her sister Anne, Nadège decides to obtain an (illegal) abortion, and dies hemorrhaging. Her death and the police investigations that follow rob Anne of her pretensions at a purely Western life-style, revealing the 'air d'étranger' (p. 398), the *Unheimlichkeit* of her very own home and country, until at the end, the impossible fusion with her twin is realized in Anne's appropriation of Nadège's place as the lover of Aunauth Gopal.⁷

On one level, the novel is a romantic melodrama, worthy of any nineteenth century *Bildungsroman*, with a 'romantic' heroine, Anne, and a 'tragic' one, Nadège. In that theme of the twins, of the *Doppelgänger*, is also a direct allusion to Michel Tournier's *Les Météores* which was

published a few years earlier, in 1975. But hidden, dissimulated under that surface structure as traditional narrative, is in fact a complex self-portrait which undermines the very notion of 'heroine,' and which conforms in all points to Michel Beaujour's rhetorical analysis of that 'genre' in *Miroirs d'encre*.⁸ Instead of reading the novel as another avatar of nineteenth century realism in a colonial frame, we can therefore situate it in another tradition, that of a tropological 'écriture inachevée,' the tradition of self-portraiture which Beaujour traces from Montaigne to Roland Barthes via Bacon, Nietzsche, Michel Leiris and others. But we can go a step further than Beaujour, because in his analysis, only a non-linear, fragmented text qualifies as 'self-portrait.' Here, however, we have both a linear narrative and a fragmented self-portrait which enter into dialogue with each other, a dialogue which constructs the narrative in the very gap, the very space where it has deconstructed the identity of the female heroines.

Indeed, the names of the heroines, Anne and Nadège, when pronounced together, quickly, and with the vernacular Creole accent of the island, phonetically sound like '*anamnès*': Anne-Nadège or [anadɛʒ] becomes 'ananesè' or [ananeʒ] since one of the main characteristics of Creole pronunciation is to soften all consonants and to change the alveolar fricatives into dentals, i.e. the [ʒ] sound into a [z] sound. This book would then figure as Humbert's journey back to her native island and to her previous selves, as embodied by Anne and Nadège. We thus have a perfect illustration of what Derrida says in *Glas*: 'Un texte "n'existe," ne résiste, ne consiste, ne refoule, ne se laisse lire ou écrire que s'il est travaillé par l'illisibilité d'un nom propre.'⁹ Here, the 'noms propres' of the heroines point to the very lack of 'nom propre' and identity for the *métis* woman writer who must live, and attempt to create her self-portrait, in the interval between patriarchal cultures and colonial heritages.

It may be useful to recall Albert Memmi's pronouncement that our main problem as colonized peoples is that we suffer from cultural amnesia. Here, by contrast, we have an anamnesis in all the senses of the term. Let me explain this by turning briefly to etymology: the word 'anamnesis' is from the Greek *ana-*, 'back again' or 'up,' *-mneme*, 'memory,' and the suffix *-sis*, 'process': the process of re-membering. This word has a variety of meanings depending on the context. Webster's definitions include the following: in Platonism, it is the recollection

7 This short summary is similar to the one I use in another article: '*Métissage*,

Emancipation and Female Textuality,' in *Life/Lines: Theoretical Essays on Women's Autobiography*, Bella Brotzki and Céleste Schenck, eds. (forthcoming from Cornell University Press).

8 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1980)

9 *Glas*, I (Paris: Éditions Denoël/Gonthier 1981) 45

of the Ideas which the soul had known in a previous existence; in psychiatry, it is a case history as recounted by the patient; and in Catholic liturgy, it is a prayer in a Eucharistic service recalling the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. All these meanings combined are useful to the understanding of Humbert's text, which elaborates a complicated and polysemic set of implicit correspondences between the Platonic meaning and the Hindu notion of metempsychosis or reincarnation; between Christ's immolation and Nadège's fate; and between the Nietzschean / Freudian / Lacanian notions of *Aufhebung*¹⁰ and the construction of the narrative. Once we understand how 'anamnesis' can be used as a vernacular paradigm for generating interpretation, we can draw from the text those Nietzschean elements which emphasize its dual generic status. In what follows, I want to show how the textual layers allow for this double reading.

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Ariane, ma sœur, de quel amour blessée,
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée!

Racine, *Phèdre* v, 253-4

Reflect on the whole history of women: do they
not *have* to be first of all and above all else
actresses?

The Gay Science v: #361

The *Prologue* which frames the narrative situates Anne and Aunauth as lovers living in Paris and studying at the Sorbonne. It corresponds to the here and now of the narration, and is echoed, in the body of the text, by two other such temporal instances where the past and the present are telescoped into each other: Anne interrupts the thread of

¹⁰ For a discussion of the concept of *Aufhebung* in Hegel and Nietzsche, see Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books 1956) 204-6 and his translator's note, in F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books 1969) 73; for a discussion of the concept in Hegel, Freud and Lacan, see Anthony Wilden, 'Lacan and the Discourse of the Other,' in Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1968) 195, 279, 285, 286.

the story to reflect on her reasons for writing and on the experience that triggered her narrative impulse. She lived that Parisian exile as a numbing episode:

... la Sorbonne où j'écoutais des hommes graves parler comme Paul Roux, avec les mêmes mots savants, ... le même regard sérieux, ce regard qui vous rend anonyme et insignifiant, j'aimais ce regard-là parce qu'il m'était jusqu'à mon nom ... (p. 316)

but a salutary one, since it proved to be the motivation she needed to face the past:

Dans le labyrinthe où je m'étais égarée, je me mis à chercher obstinément le fil qui me ramènerait au vieux pays de l'enfance. (p. 313)

To recreate the past is a defensive need, an attempt to give depth and dimension to her childhood world negated by the present reality of Paris. Anne-Ariadne, having abandoned her island, finds herself writing in order to bring both her island and her dead sister, '[her] second, departed self' (GS II: #60: 123) back to life, recalling 'la vraie vie, celle qui m'attend ... très loin de Paris, du métro que je prenais comme une automate, du quartier Latin où j'étais une étrangère de plus...' (p. 316). It is this decentering experience of absence and fragmentation which generates her narrative discourse. Words are needed to thematize the 'passé débordant, encore bouillonnant comme un fleuve en crue' (p. 315), and to elaborate the discursive universe where the narrator can begin to confront and overcome the past. (This Heraclitan image of the 'fleuve' connotes the sheer energy of remembrance as well as the fluctuating perspectives of memory and the relativism of individual or cultural standpoints, as reflected in the book.)

The phenomenon of depersonalization, absence and loss experienced by Anne in Paris is, according to Michel Beaujour's rhetoric of the self-portrait, the symptom which defines and inaugurates that literary 'genre': 'C'est sans doute que l'expérience inaugurale de l'autoportrait est celle du vide, de l'absence à soi' (Beaujour, p. 9). In *A l'autre bout de moi*, the narrative thread allows Anne to find her way in the maze of memory. But her efforts at self-portrayal lead her to reconstruct the whole cultural world that *was* hers, and yet was not *hers*, because she could never belong to it: being a *métis* puts her in a marginal position with respect to all the ethnic groups represented in her text. The exile in Paris brings home (so to speak) the dilemma inherent in her condition of *métis*. It cruelly confirms her feelings of ambiguity and

instability, her existence condemned to the periphery, to limbo. Her discursive effort of memory, therefore, does not aim to re-establish a lost 'identity.' Instead, it is a rhetorical device used to create a series of paradigms homologous to that 'departed self': Anne, Nadège, Mauritius, the Chinese shop and the verbal corpus of the book are isomorphous and can be substituted for one another. This system of correspondences and analogies is, to quote Beaujour, the organizing principle of the 'autoportrait':

[L'autoportrait] tente de constituer sa cohérence grâce à un système de rappels, de reprises, de superpositions ou de correspondances entre des éléments homologues et substituables... (Beaujour, p. 9)

Hence, the verbal constructions which mimic and simulate the processes of memory are a matrix for structures, figures and topoi by means of which the writer recalls, stages and transcends the past and her own individuality.¹¹

La machine d'écriture ... produit la mimésis d'un ... type d'anamnèse qu'on pourrait appeler "métempyschose": du moins est-ce un type de mémoire à la fois très archaïque et très moderne par quoi les événements d'une vie individuelle sont éclipsés par la remémoration de toute une culture, apportant ainsi un paradoxal oubli de soi. (Beaujour, p. 26)

It is therefore not surprising, Beaujour goes on, that one of the 'figures' which most frequently structures meaning in the 'autoportrait' is that of Christ at the moment of his death. Such is the case, for example, with Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, a book which makes clear 'les rapports de l'autoportrait à l'Incarnation et à la Résurrection,' and which contains 'en [son] centre un microcosme du corpus littéraire de [son] auteur' (Beaujour, p. 320).

In Anne's narrative, the process of *écriture* enacts the narrator's 'paradoxal oubli de soi' first, by creating the paradigmatic chain of substitutions between Anne, Nadège, the island and the book. Then, the death of Nadège casts her in the role of a female Antichrist, immolated because of her sister's (her island's) intolerance, sacrificed to the narrow Christian values of the white society to which Anne was striving to belong. Finally, after her death, Nadège is resurrected in the person of Anne: a substitution occurs, Anne undergoes a metamorphosis, becoming the person her sister was. She is compelled to assume Nadège's place as Aunauth's lover and to espouse Nadège's point

¹¹ This process being that of the *Aufhebung* itself.

of view on the illusory nature of her Apollonian or Western quest for a stable ground to subjectivity.

A l'autre bout de moi (unlike *Ecce Homo* for Nietzsche) is a first book. But like *Ecce Homo*, it contains a 'microcosm' in its center: I would even argue that it is really the island's, and not just Anne's, self-portrait, since the book recreates textually a panorama of life in pre-independence Mauritius. The island, like the female autograph of the story, writes itself into literary history, inscribing its mosaic of points of view and its fragments of diverse cultures into the existing corpus of traditional writings about islands. It manages to insert itself into an ancient genre of writing (the object of which it had been), adopting the same rhetorical devices and sign systems, but using those to articulate a different vision, to invent new kinds of (a-)subjectivities.

The relationship between Anne and Nadège, between the two faces of Janus as textual persona of the author, is a complex one. The two sisters initially choose to adhere to two different traditions, both of which are an integral part of themselves, since they are *sang-mêlé*, mixed-bloods whose non-white ancestry ('quelque trisaieule hindoue dont on avait perdu la mémoire tant on évitait d'en parler' [p. 28]) is a heavy liability in a colonial society which keeps a meticulous count of each element in everyone's pedigree. Nadège, the face that looks to the East, overcomes that which in her colonial culture, in herself, contributes to labeling *métissage* almost as a 'skin disease.' Anne, on the other hand, must be cruel to the point of murder toward her sister (or the sister in her), because she prefers to be the face that looks to the West, to her European heritage, and would rather mask, obscure and deny all traces of her Hindu ancestry.

In Nietzschean terms, then, Nadège is the Dionysian principle, stifled by the Apollonian strivings of Anne, only to come back and recur in Anne, once she has succeeded in overcoming her denials of the Dionysian, in healing her divided consciousness. It is the process of writing which allows her to confront and reject the Apollonian as symbol of the Western will to power over others. Writing is the thread, 'le fil,' which lets her explore the labyrinth of the past and transforms her into the legendary Ariadne. The couple she forms with her sister Nadège is the counterpart of Nietzsche's 'divine couple': Dionysus-Ariadne, in which Dionysus figures as the labyrinth.¹² Nadège(-Dionysus) is

¹² See Nietzsche's poem 'Ariadne's Lament' in 'Dionysus Dithyrambs,' *The Portable Nietzsche*, 345: 'Be clever, Ariadne! / You have small ears, you have my ears: / Put a clever word into them! / Must one not first hate each other if one is to love each other? / I am your labyrinth.'

Anne's labyrinth, her unconscious, and Anne(-Ariadne)'s journey takes her beyond a narcissistic, Western, belief in the importance of a stable individuality. In achieving fusion with her opposite, she reaches a state of self-dispossession: this is not, however, her synthetic recuperation of dialectical oppositions, merely her absorption into an infinitely fragmented universe, like the labyrinth itself.

The deployment of the narrative takes Anne back to the chaotic events of the past as she attempts to gather together all the elements of her fragmented consciousness. Retracing her way through the familiar sites of her childhood (including an abandoned cemetery behind her home), she adopts the rhetorical devices of a ritual journey, '[d]e sorte que ce livre est également une tentative de rassemblement du sujet au long d'un parcours initiatique' (Beaujour, 283).

The starting point of that journey is her family's house, haunted by the presence of her mother's blank, obliterated femininity. That house is linked to her other 'home,' the 'boutique-chinois,'¹³ her favorite shelter, the 'abri accueillant' (p. 97), whose unusual stock of incongruous objects from all over the world fascinates her:

On y trouvait de tout: du moins tout ce que mes désirs d'enfant pouvaient imaginer, chaussures made in China, statues de saints ou de Bouddha, cahiers-crayons-gommes-compas, pièges à souris et mort-aux-rats, bâtons de santal-porcelaine de Chine, fil à broder-papier mousseline, tue-mouches et attrape-nigauds, pâte d'amande et protège-flamme, am stram gram et colegram en ai-je oublié? Oui, ces sacs de farine par exemple, tout gonflés d'odeurs d'amidon, ces âcres boules de tamarin vous fixant comme des yeux noirs sans pupille, ce poisson salé raidi contre le mur dans le mystère de l'arrière-boutique; et dans cette antichambre du paradis, le Chinois ne cessait de sourire, demandez seulement, demandez et vous recevrez, que n'avait-il pas? il opinait du chef, il servait, servait, ça me confondait d'admiration et de reconnaissance. (p. 16)

The store is a maternal imago, the source of happiness and wonder and an emblematic topos, at once mother and motherland: 'un deuxième foyer où la réalité se paraît d'enchantements' (p. 63). It conveys heat and protection like a womb: 'je reste sous la coquille de [l]a boutique' (p. 164), says Anne, and she often falls asleep on the sun-warmed floor. When it comes time to wake up and leave, she suffers an excruciating separation; 'j'avais un mal fou à me mettre debout. Tous mes muscles

crâquaient, Mère m'enfantait de nouveau, et c'était une affreuse douleur de naître' (p. 166). Expelled from the womb as from paradise, she feels banished, exiled to an inhospitable land. The pain of exile and marginality, the torture of separation from the original source of happiness and well-being: the predicament of the narrator, like that of Adam and Eve or Cain and Abel, is the founding experience of the human condition.

But her paradise is by no means a stable and unchanging resting place, an immutable center in the flux of life. On this island, subjected almost yearly to tropical hurricanes, the store is a seductive shelter but an ephemeral one: it is destroyed and must be rebuilt after the passage of the storm: 'au carrefour ... la boutique dressait sa carcasse éventrée' (p. 461).¹⁴ On a closer look, though, it is only partially destroyed: 'De la lumière filtrait à travers les volets de l'arrière boutique, miraculeusement intacte' (p. 461). What evades destruction from the elements, that mysterious 'arrière boutique,' is like the unconscious core of memory, the source of language and discourse, the clue (or coil) that allows the writer to spin her web of images and metaphors.¹⁵ The core of the imago is untouched. Dismembered, 'éventrée,' though it is, it will soon manage to re-establish its network, its system of economic exchange, throughout the neighborhood: 'dans un ou deux ans, à force de patience, d'économie et de travail, la boutique aurait repoussé, elle étendrait de nouveau les ramifications de son règne économique à travers le quartier' (p. 461). Nothing remains stable in this microcosm. Only a network of relationships can allow for survival.

This network, or web, is emblematic of the very process of *écriture*, which creates a similar system of ramifications between various temporal instances, diverse cultures and a set of locations and characters that mirror each other textually. The store is the maternal womb as well as the matrix of discourse which generates the metaphors and the symbolic correspondances between the linguistic body of the text, and the narrating self, her alter ego, her family, her race(s), her culture(s), and her homeland.

Another recurring metaphor is the road, 'la belle route lisse — si belle avec son macadam bleu, et toujours si tiède, si douce aux pieds, du

¹⁴ Compare this to pages 64 ff: at the beginning of the narrative, the store seems to be invincible, indestructible. It is the process of writing itself which seems to contribute to the slow and gradual erosion of that stability.

¹⁵ It is worth noting here that Montaigne, in his *Essais*, calls the inner self his 'arrière boutique,' his 'moi profond,' the one that exists beyond appearance and simulacrum.

¹³ In the Creole dialect of the island, adjectives very rarely take the mark of the feminine.

lait' (p. 97) which has a maternal, nurturing connotation. It is at once umbilical cord and narrative thread. It takes Anne to the various locations or topoi of her childhood, each of which is of significant importance in the process of anamnesis, much as the Way of the Cross takes Catholic faithful through the same steps as Christ during His Passion. Here, the road, 'asphalte frais et chaud ... [m]er-asphalte, asphalté-mer...' (p. 161), winds its way through the cane fields to the Hindu quarter, along the Mosque, the spacious colonial domains of the whites and to Aunauth Gopaul's house. It connects all the idiosyncratic and heterogeneous elements of this fragmented society. But it is at once comforting and threatening, because Anne cannot accept a plurality of identities as readily as her sister does: '... la route trop bleue, trop lisse, du lait! du lait empoisonné!' (p. 268) The carefree and self-assured ease with which Nadège negotiates all the apparent contradictions of her cultural background, moving in and out of Hindu or Catholic subcultures, is at once attractive and repulsive to Anne:

Je m'essouffai à la rattraper sur les routes, tandis qu'avec une feinte espièglerie elle s'efforçait de fuir. (pp. 313-14)

At other times, Nadège is the pursuer, the one chasing Anne who escapes and retreats into the protective shell of the store:

... sur la route Nadège me suit, l'ombre s'allonge derrière moi et je sens Nadège dans l'air, invisible présence ou absence ... Vivement la boutique, ses odeurs d'épices, son va-et-vient d'acheteurs... (p. 160)

As she tries to keep up with Nadège's games, Anne is gradually, but reluctantly, pulled in the opposite direction from what she considers her own:

De nouveau la route, la route lisse comme du lait, fleuve qui m'emportait, qui me tirait à contre-courant de moi-même, me poussait comme il avait poussé Nadège, me halait pantelante vers cette maison qui m'étonnait d'être si proche, la maison d'Aunauth Gopaul, l'Indien interdit. (p. 332)

Here the road is a 'fleuve,' like the unconscious impulse to remember and verbalize the repressed, which is pure energy. It is a model of artistic creativity, the Dionysian metamorphosis or ecstasis outside of oneself which strips Anne of her individuation, returns her to the chaos of memory out of which she constructs meaning for, as Nietzsche says, 'one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star' (Z 1: 129).

The same road brings to their house the outsider, the stranger whose role as a catalyst is important to the development of the narrative. He is Paul Roux, the French doctor, who has been sent to the island by the World Health Organization to conduct a study for the UN. His naive, European, Marxist views (what Anne's father terms his 'idéisme fumeux' [p. 245]), are developed in long conversations with Nadège. They open new horizons for her, preparing the way for her interest in the Indian politician. At first, Nadège listens to him intently, absorbed in his speeches, 'même aux moments où je trouvais, moi, que le Français déraisonnait, semblait dans l'utopie la plus burlesque' (p. 244), says Anne. His clear, organized and coherent scenarios for a better tomorrow seem too logical and simplistic. Something of the complexities of her life is missing in those discourses that tend to organize experience into neat categories, although the ideas interest Anne:

Et pourtant, durant les deux mois où il demeura parmi nous, je l'étudiai plus passionnément, plus lucidement que je ne l'avais jamais fait pour quiconque. (p. 239)

His presence 'fait fonction de révélateur,' triggers the actions and reactions that reveal characters:

[C]eux qui captivaient perpétuellement mon regard, c'étaient donc les autres, chacun jouant en face de lui un rôle complexe, changeant continuellement de masque, dans une sorte de ballet fantastique. (p. 239)

As he gets closely involved in the life of the Morin family, it becomes clear that he would be 'a good catch' for Nadège and he does attempt to propose marriage, offering to take her back to his native mountains, in the Vosges region. In an ironic way, he corresponds to Zarathustra: he comes down from his mountain, visits an island and preaches a new gospel. But he turns out to be 'une proie empoisonnée' (p. 239), a kind of *pharmakon*, caught as he is in a web of complex social relationships between Anne, Pierre, Nadège, Aunauth and the father. He proves unable to understand the necessity for dissimulation and camouflage as a survival strategy for the *métis* of the island: 'Paul Roux le censeur désapprouvait toute cachoterie' (p. 288). His intransigence is that of a moralist who wants to herald a new era of social justice, but whose limited Western perspective can only betray the heterogeneity of Mauritius, and its complicated social structures.

His role as interpreter of the social text of Mauritius corresponds to a possible critical approach to the narrative text itself, an approach which is rejected as too narrow. He is a well-intentioned but somewhat limited critic, blinded by his rigidly ideological and utopian bi-

ases. He is grounded in a world which cannot intersect with that of the author/narrator. His social theories are thus encoded as an antithetical model of the plurality of interpretations generated and demanded by the narrative text.

His clarity of thought is antithetical to the ambiguous situation of the Morins. His narrowly utopian vision does not take into consideration the specificity of the Morins' experience as *métis* islanders, an experience which rests on a duplicitous relation to the white world, since it is assumed by all, including the *métis*, that acceptance into that world is their primary motivation, and a bourgeois marriage the means by which the coloreds eventually succeed in 'passing' for white. Hence their effort to hide all traces of non-white 'blood' that may mar a family's past. Nadège, who refuses to adopt such hypocritical stances, cannot therefore accept the double bind of marriage to the white man, Paul, and turns instead to his Indian counterpart, Aunauth Gopaul.

Anne's idealist vision, on the other hand, is the belief that she can cover up the family's painful secrets, its past and present (the father's drinking) scandals. She compares her efforts to the slow and painstaking work of darning:

Qu'elle [Nadège] me laisse là, en paix, et à moi seule, patiemment, comme Sassita quand elle ravaudait les socquettes, je rattraperais maille par maille les trous qui béaient dans notre vie, j'effacerais le scandale, je tisserais une nouvelle toile solide, étanche, immaculée. (p. 125)

This reference to darning ('ravaudait') is another metaphor for her narrative technique. It borrows from the maid's feminine *ouvrage*, her needlework: to retrieve and gather together the many threads of experience in an effort to atone for the gaping holes in the family's history.¹⁶ Implicit in this quote is a reference to Lacan's 'béance ambiguë',¹⁷ the hole, the unmendable gap or lack in the fabric which orders the subject's consciousness. This hole, according to Freud, can never be filled out: only patched over by the delusions that the same subject constructs in order to cope with the external world.¹⁸ In Lacanian terms, the delusions are the scaffolding of words which the subject erects over the 'Real' in order to obscure it.

16 This process is the same as that of '*mé-tissage*', the view of female textuality as heterogeneous 'tissage', as I describe it in my '*Mé-tissage*, Emancipation and Female Textuality'.

17 *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1966) 248.

18 The 'patch' is a Freudian term used in the paper 'Neurosis and Psychosis', S. Freud, *Standard Edition*, XIX, 151. See also A. Wilden, 98 n. 23.

Initially, then, Anne's effort to 'effacer' the past by weaving a new 'toile ... immaculée' is a delusion that the past can be ignored and shrouded in a dishonest purity, an 'immaculate perception,' as Nietzsche would say.¹⁹ Her mother had done just that, shrouding herself in bitterness and silence. The paradoxical wish of the narrator, though, is more like the utopian wish for a 'blank page,' or a 'white canvas,' a lifestory that would not need to be told, a narrative that would not exist because her life had been happy and uneventful ('les gens heureux n'ont pas d'histoire').

But the past is scandalous and painful, and her state of total disarray in exile demands its only antidote: writing. Writing helps mend the original holes created by her family's refusal to address *mé-tissage*, to accept ambiguity. But the impulse to write, to speak up, perhaps creates new delusions, other utopias: Anne's dream of raising mixed blood children who can return to the 'paradis de verre' of the Chinese shop conforms to what Beaujour calls 'le fantasme d'une cité heureuse' (p. 22), a 'fantasme' which is but a scaffolding of words, a skeleton on which to construct new images. The hurricane has destroyed ('éventré') the store, the maternal imago around which the whole book is structured, but what remains intact in that 'arrière boutique' is the wall on which hang visions of death: 'ce poisson salé raidi' (p. 16), and the ghostlike 'sacs de farine' with the 'boules de tamarin vous fixant comme des yeux sans pupilles' (p. 16). These recall the ghost of the biological mother, and the 'sépulcres blanchis' (p. 272), the pharisees and the bigots who judge and determine the Morins' social standing and their reputation. The book, therefore, while it attempts to recreate those 'lieux évanouis, harmonies défaites' (Beaujour, p. 22), undermines and erodes its utopian project which becomes identified, in the filigree of the text, with a death wish.

For example, the narrative ends on hopeful (musical) notes: Anne arrives at the house of Aunauth where she comes to take Nadège's place. Her mother, father and sister are all dead. In her suitcase is a record: Rachmaninoff's Symphony No 2. On one level, this record is an important romantic vehicle: it is a gift to Anne from Pierre; Nadège borrows it secretly to share with Aunauth. They first make love while listening to it. It is this music, 'le disque ... plein de fougue et de violence,' which plays a decisive part in opening Nadège's eyes to the folly of a 'mariage de raison' (p. 424) with the French doctor. Finally, as

19 Z, II, On Immaculate Perception, p. 235: 'Behind a god's mask you hide from yourselves, in your "purity".'

the last sentence of the book implies, this music is the background for Anne and Aunauth's first romantic encounter:

Il s'est alors dirigé vers l'électrophone, et après avoir placé le disque sur le plateau il a guidé l'aiguille à l'orée de la symphonie. (p. 463)

Here, as in Nietzsche, music is the privileged art. It touches the whole gamut of human emotions, affirming diversity and multiplicity, lifting barriers and harmonizing opposites. It symbolizes a Dionysian resurrection for Anne, a self-dispossession as she is transformed into Nadège, whose whole life was like a symphony:

Sa vie, elle la vivait comme l'on joue une symphonie; une constante harmonie de l'intérieur avec l'extérieur lui était indispensable, les passions, les gens, la nature et les mots, tout devait se marier sans fausses notes. (p. 420)

This 'harmonie' which is Nadège's aim in life is Anne's aim as a writer and the phrase is an apt description of the novel.²⁰ That is why I would like to suggest that accompanying the 'Symphony No 2' is, in fact, an implicit reference to Rachmaninoff's symphonic poem, also known as *the Isle of the Dead*. This pair of symphonies would, covertly, echo and reflect the whole binary structure of the novel while implying that such a system of signs, grounded in the traditional dichotomies of Western metaphysics, is a vehicle of death: Nadège has an abortion and dies; by contrast, Sassita, who listens to Indian music on the local radio, reaches autonomy and decides to remarry and adopt an orphaned baby.²¹

²⁰ The novel seen as verbal mausoleum for Nadège, as her 'tombeau mallarméen,' which exists, like the book, around an empty center. See Beaujour, 230-2.

²¹ In an article entitled '*A l'autre bout de moi*' de Marie-Thérèse Humbert et la littérature mauricienne' (in a publication of the Centre d'Études Francophones, Université de Paris XIII, *Itinéraires et contacts de cultures* [Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan 1982], vol. 2, 113-39), Jean-Louis Joubert writes: '... le disque est un objet très concret, une chose ... Sa pochette est décrite avec précision ... la typographie du titre est reproduite comme en calligramme ... pour magnifier le mot "SYM-PHONIE" imprimé en capitales. (Le lecteur soucieux de musicologie pourrait relever l'étrangeté de cette "Symphonie No 2 pour piano et orchestre de Rachmaninov." Bizarres!') (p. 122). Indeed, what I would like to suggest here is that Humbert does invite her reader to wonder about the significations of this record as an 'objet magique' (Joubert, 123), and my interpretation leads me to believe that the referent of 'Symphonie No 2' is none other than *The Isle of the Dead*, and that, as a privileged sign in this novel, the record simply refers to another sign, and not to external reality.

In an emblematic episode of Chapter 6 we are plunged into the general atmosphere of death and decay which surrounds the Morin family. In this grotesquely funny scene, Nadège stages a masquerade for the purpose of disconcerting Paul Roux, whose humanitarian harangues are now getting on her nerves. She involves both her father and her sister in a macabre game, during which Anne herself adopts a 'masque' (p. 247). This conveniently exempts her from her role as 'native informant' vis-à-vis the French doctor: 'Paul Roux ne put rien lire sur ma figure,' as she says. While the father ironically exclaims: 'On s'occupe trop des vivants ici, pas assez des morts,' they all march to the abandoned backyard cemetery where (with the energy of despair) Nadège endeavors to scrub the old tombstones and moss-covered crosses. This comedy takes place in a putrid physical environment and under the affectless, petrifying and petrified gaze of Paul:

Dans l'air lourd l'odeur des mangues mûres écrasées au sol se mêlait désagréablement à celle de la fiente des poules dans les cages, ça se combinait en une senteur surette de fermentation qui prenait à la gorge. Le Français nous avait suivis sans piper mot, il se tenait un peu en retrait, le visage immobile comme celui des touristes devant les Hindous en transe au cours des processions, trop impressionnés pour oser manifester un sentiment quelconque. (p. 248)

The native woman puts on a gruesome spectacle for the benefit of the 'tourist' Paul who is in the uncomfortable position of observer and voyeur of the 'mœurs macabres des créoles francophones' (p. 249), a situation which is but an exaggeration of the role he had adopted to begin with when launching himself into grand analyses of the political and social context of their lives. As an antimodel for the critic, therefore, he is constructed as deficient, not just because of his narrow political perspective, but also as a result of his inability to show emotion or affect before the (textual) events he witnesses. His pretense of objectivity is a fallacy: it is the wisdom and the neutrality of death.

On the other hand, Nadège's gift of theatre, her ability to mock is the mark of an unconventional wisdom. Her nihilism, her 'volonté... de domination d'elle-même ... d'anéantissement' (p. 369), as Aunauth says, is a protective device, a dissimulating strategy against the hypocrisy of colonial society and the intolerable scrutiny of Paul (cf. pp. 286-7). Impertinence personified, she illustrates well one of Nietzsche's insights about the dilemmas of women:

Young women try hard to appear superficial and thoughtless. The most refined simulate a kind of impertinence. (GS II: #71: 128)

Nadège is the 'spirit full of gay sarcasm' (Z I: 152) in more ways than one. She adopts masks, changes roles and dresses in a plurality of selves, thus avoiding, temporarily, the death-dealing blows of culture and civilization. It is her mother, in her passive yet bitter acceptance of the tenets of 19th century European culture (and its pseudo-scientific, racist beliefs in heredity) who figures as the main agent of death and *resentiment*. Her rigid need to instill respectability in her daughters is described as an absurd effort to hide — to kill — the 'subhuman' in the *métis*:

Cet épiderme hâlé, tout notre entourage nous confirmait dans l'idée que c'était quelque chose de la bête en nous, quelque chose d'immonde, qui pointait l'oreille, et qu'il fallait absolument soustraire aux regards. De la tenue Nadège, de la tenue, Anne! Voyons, habillées ainsi, vous vous feriez prendre pour de petites Indiennes! Quand Mère avait dit ça, elle avait tout dit. (p. 39)

'Cet épiderme hâlé' is one of numerous references to the skin as symptom of a disease, as cultural sign of decadence. As indicated earlier, this metaphor of the skin is used by Zarathustra in 'On Great Events' (Z II: 242): 'The earth ... has a skin, and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called "man."' In Anne's narrative, it is 'quelque chose d'immonde' in the make up of the *métis* women which shows up as 'hâlé,' as the outward sign of cultural sickness and bestiality, such as these are defined by the mother who has thoroughly internalized the racist colonial ideology.

But Nadège's unconventional behavior allows her — unlike Anne — to take in stride the social stigmas attached to the color of her skin, and to refrain from following the 'herd' of complacent and passive *métis*. Her strength is her insolence, as illustrated in this incident which occurs during an English lesson at school:

Exercice no. 1. Barrer les termes qui ne conviennent pas. *What colour are your eyes? Blue-gray-green-brown or dark? ... What colour is your skin? Yellow-white-brown or black?* A Maurice, la réponse correcte était *yellow* ou *brown*, plus rarement *white* ...

Mais Nadège, à sept ans, protestait. Ma peau n'est ni blanche, ni jaune, ni noire, ni marron. Comment donc est-elle? La maîtresse, de couleur elle aussi, disait: Nadège Morin, encore à faire du mauvais esprit! Mettez *My skin is golden*, et ça ira. Ça n'allait pas. Nadège écrivait en ricanant. *My skin is dirty*, ma peau est sale. Nadège serait punie. Punie à cause de sa peau: l'après-midi, en apprenant ce qui s'était passé Mère donnerait raison à la maîtresse. (p. 28)

Nadège is able to subvert rigid social codes by laughing away the foolishness of society whose power is doubly represented here by the school system and by the English language, the language of the master: Mauritius is under British rule at the time. The school mistress, like the mother, is a slave to the system and can only perpetuate its demeaning aspects, despite a tentative effort to give a positive connotation ('golden') to the idea of color. But this 'foreign' language and the reality it creates must be learned early: it impresses upon the colored children their non-being, their absence from representation within that symbolic order. Since there is no unambiguous term for what they are, it means that they have no existence in that realm of language, or that they can only be defined negatively by what they are not: not white, not black, etc.²²

Thus indoctrinated, Anne plays the game by the rules, in order to survive. She is like the ape, the 'foaming fool,' who unwittingly parodies Zarathustra's style;²³ like a number of *métis* who desperately try to imitate the whites' wealthy and glamorous lifestyle ('les nôtres s'efforçaient de singer leur train de vie' [p. 39], she says), Anne is anxious to be accepted by white society: that is why she secretly dates Pierre who cannot quite bring himself to be open and public about it. As a result, Anne feels most ashamed of her skin: '[J]'avais mal à la peau, honte à la peau, j'en avais assez de ce mal et de cette honte, je tenais en laisse ma colère, je patientais...' (p. 291). As for Pierre, with a measure of bad faith (or bad conscience), he tries to explain to her that he, too, feels oppressed by the conventions of this bourgeois milieu, but that '[o]n ne peut pas déposer sa peau blanche sur un meuble comme un vêtement qu'on enlève' (p. 175). He cannot escape the determinations of his social and cultural milieu, any more than he can escape the color of his skin. But he feels pity for her and his spineless goodwill casts him in the role of a 'good' and 'weak' Christian who cannot oppose the

²² The 'traces' these adjectives refer to are fallacies, creations of the 19th century, pre-darwinian, 'scientific' discourse, as Stephen J. Gould has amply shown. See especially *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton 1981) and *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1977). We have inherited these categories which still mould our thinking in many ways.

²³ Z III, On Passing By, 287. I owe an important debt to Margot Norris' discussion of mimesis and camouflage in her article 'Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka and the Problem of Mimesis,' *MLN* 95 (Dec. 1980) 1232-53. It provided the insights which allowed me to see patterns in Humbert's work that relate directly to those problems.

moral establishment of his time (Z III: 324). He is a pharisee, and a 'despiser of the body'²⁴ whose respect for Anne's virtue inescapably turns into contempt when his calculated and timid lovemaking proves a poor match for Anne's disappearing caution: 'A ce petit jeu, nous apprimes à nous mépriser' (p. 299).

This textual string of 'skin' metaphors points to a critique of the 'civilizing' influence of culture over nature. Like the skin on the body, culture is a shroud that veils the instincts or the bestiality ('quelque chose de la bête en nous') of that body, repressing them, banishing them to the unconscious. The scission or split that accompanies this dichotomy between nature and culture, the instincts and consciousness, are constitutive of what Nietzsche calls the 'internalization of man, the instincts for freedom being turned inward and becoming the origins of 'bad conscience' (OGM II #16-17: 84-7). The question of culture is central to Nietzsche's understanding of the repression of the body, as it will be for Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and Eric Blondel has shown that for Nietzsche, 'life is fundamentally a sickness ... As the metaphor of the repressed body and as Dionysus dismembered, culture is nothing other than the obverse of [instinctual, natural or adaptive] morality.'²⁵ Nietzsche's anger focuses specifically on the Judeo-Christian bedrock of Western civilization, and is evident in all his writings, but especially in *The Antichrist*:

To become perfect, he was advised to draw in his senses, turtle fashion, to cease all intercourse with earthly things, to shed his mortal shroud: then his essence would remain, the "pure spirit." Here too we have reconsidered ... The "pure spirit" is pure stupidity: if we subtract the nervous system and the senses – the "mortal shroud" – then we miscalculate – that is all! (A #14: 581)

This 'mortal shroud,' like the epidermal surface of the skin and the life of the body, is what culture represses in order to make room for the 'pure spirit,' the 'soul' or 'ego' (A #15: 581) which Nietzsche equates with the 'sickness' or 'disease' of cultural conditioning. This sickness,

²⁴ Z I, On the Despisers of the Body, 147: 'I want to speak to the despisers of the body. It is their respect that begets their contempt.'

²⁵ Eric Blondel, 'Nietzsche: Life as Metaphor,' translated from the French and reprinted in *The New Nietzsche*, David B. Allison, ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1985) 165. I have added the words in brackets to clarify Blondel's point. He is referring to *The Antichrist*, 14, in which Nietzsche discusses 'fictitious morality and religion ... the very formula for decadence' and opposes those to 'nature' and 'reality.'

however, is 'pregnant with a future ... as if man were not a goal, but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise' (OGM II #16: 85). If man is only an episode and a promise, then it is through his capacity for change and rebirth that he can succeed in overcoming his culture, his 'skin disease'; or as Deleuze says, 'c'est dans son essence que l'homme est dit maladie de peau de la terre,'²⁶ in his essence, and not in his capacity for metamorphosis, his process of becoming. So it is that Nadège can redeem Anne's temptations to let herself be coopted by 'civilization,' by 'whiteness,' because she accepts the process of becoming, and its end result, death. She understands intuitively that '[s]elf-overcoming involves a measure of suffering and also of cruelty, not only in the individual's relation to others but also in his attitude toward himself' (Kaufmann, p. 211). Because Nadège surrenders herself to change and polysemy, Anne learns from her the value of ambivalence and ambiguity, rejects Apollonian clarity, 'immaculate perception,' as symbol of the Western will to power over others. Instead, she comes to an understanding of the value of difference, of the plurality of meaning in the person of Ariadne. As Deleuze says:

Dionysos apprend à Ariane son secret: le vrai labyrinthe est Dionysos lui-même, le vrai fil est le fil de l'affirmation ... L'affirmation est jouissance et jeu de sa propre différence. (p. 216)

This power to affirm difference is the secret Anne-Ariadne learns from Nadège: the privileged difference of *métissage*.²⁷ The power of affirmation is the Dionysian will to power over oneself, which allows Anne to accept the past and to let it recur, because: '[l]a leçon de l'éternel retour est qu'il n'y a pas de retour du négatif. ... Seul revient ce qui affirme, ou ce qui est affirmé' (Deleuze, p. 217). To put it another way, for Nietzsche, '[t]he idea of recurrence is intended to heal the disjunction between time and eternity and especially the resentment against the past which divides the consciousness of the alienated person.'²⁸ Once we understand this affirmative side of eternal return, we can see

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1962) 192

²⁷ See my 'Métissage, Emancipation and Female Textuality,' and n. 16 above.

²⁸ Ofelia Schutte, *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1984) 67-8 and 122-3. For Nietzsche, everything, good or bad, recurs, but it is up to the individual to refuse to be resentful in order to allow only the positive, the active (and not the reactive) to recur, and thus prepare the world for our children.

Anne as reaching a point of self-integration and self-acceptance which allows her to put into perspective her maternal legacy of 'ressentiment,' and to surrender to her (forbidden) desire for the unknown ('l'Indien interdit,' Aunauth, whose name phonetically conveys 'zero,' the excluded middle, the void: o-naught).²⁹

Finally, the appropriate and conclusive image regarding this kind of 'skin disease' is furnished by the island itself: in Mauritius, the *earrifa* literally suffers from a disease of color. In fact, there is a place, a 'lieu-dit' in a mountainous region of the island called 'Chamarel' where strata of volcanic lava, rich in minerals, were sedimented in layers of different colors, forming a curious area of rainbow-striped hills where no vegetation of any kind grows, where the earth is barren. This desolation has an awesome beauty which exerts a definite attraction on Anne's imagination:

Mais je vais m'échapper, pour l'instant inerte contre le ciment tiède, je suis chrysalide; si mes muscles sont engourdis, c'est qu'ils se préparent à un essor prochain. ... [P]artout, dans l'air lourd, des armées de parfums s'avancent à ma rencontre, et au lieu de me noyer dans leur *pesanteur*, ils m'emporteront, me souleveront jusqu'au faite des grandes chaînes montagneuses là-bas, tout là-bas, au-delà de Chamarel et de ses terres malades de *couleur*, là où la vie commence. (pp. 164-5, my italics)³⁰

Like a chrysalis about to become butterfly or a bird trying to outsoar tradition, Anne has the urge to shed the dead weight of convention, the 'pesanteur,' the spirit of gravity which weighs her down like Zarathustra's camel (Z I: 137; III: 303). That weight is her old self, the resentful one that she wishes to shake off, as Zarathustra's dwarf is

²⁹ Although this pun is more convincing in English than in French, I want to emphasize here that it is nonetheless fairly obvious to a reader familiar with Mauritian society, since Mauritius, like Canada, is a multilingual society. Indeed, English is the official political language of the island, despite the fact that Creole and French are more widely spoken. Furthermore, Aunauth is an Indian politician who is 'diplômé de l'Université de Londres' (p. 432) and thus represents textually a *difference*, a linguistic and political interference in the French text of the novel.

³⁰ This passage could be compared to *The Gay Science* II #60: 123: 'Does my happiness itself sit in this quiet place – my happier ego, my second, departed self? Not to be dead and yet no longer alive? A spiritlike intermediate being: quietly observing, gliding, floating? As the boat that with its white sails moves like an immense butterfly over the dark sea. Yes! To move *over* existence! That's it! That would be something!'

shaken off the prophet's shoulder when they both reach the gateway where 'two paths meet' (Z III: 269). That gateway is the 'moment,' where the past and the future come together in the eternal recurrence of things. Mauritius – like Anne's text – is such a crossroads of spatial and temporal dimensions³¹ and Anne's metamorphosis is a letting-go of bitterness and resentment in favor of a life-affirming vision of the future: she can finally be the face that says 'yes,' and permit herself to walk through the gate. Like Nietzsche whose *Ecce Homo* is subtitled 'How one becomes what one is,' she becomes what she is: the 'âne,' the donkey that says Hee-haw, I-A, 'Ja,' and thus transcends traditional morality and dualism as the *Übermensch* would.³² Only then can she allow herself to follow her destiny and move in with Aunauth.

In Chamarel, the earth is bare but that is where 'la vie commence,' because Anne must be stripped of all her Western pretensions and beliefs before she can start living somewhat autonomously (like Sassita) and creatively (as a writer). This idea of desolation connotes another of Nietzsche's metaphors (at least in its French translation); a metaphor which relates directly to the author's choice of names for Nadège:

Partout de la neige, la vie est muette ici; les dernières corneilles dont on entend la voix croassent: A quoi bon? En vain! Nada! Rien ne pousse et ne croît plus ici.³³

La neige, nada: Nadège. The phonetic similarity of these words implies a certain nihilism, a 'valeur de néant' (Deleuze, p. 169) in Nadège, as Aunauth himself remarks (p. 369). But more importantly, I think, it reveals that for the author, 'Nadège' is nothing but a textual construct, a potentiality, a device which allows 'Anne' to explore the 'murdered visions' of her youth, [her] happier ego, [her] second, departed self' (GS II: #60: 123)³⁴ as Zarathustra did on the 'isle of tombs.' In Nietzsche's ontology of self-healing, the will to power (over oneself) is a process of self-overcoming, a stripping from the ego of its masks, a creative rebirth, albeit a sometimes cruel and violent one.³⁵ Thus, Nadège's un-

³¹ Humbert's conception of the narrative as a crossroads of ideas and problems is not unlike André Gide's. He said once: 'Le roman? ... Un carrefour; un rendez-vous de problèmes.'

³² For a discussion of the concepts of existential continuity and the *Übermensch* as used here, see Schutte, chapters 3 and 5, pp. 57-75 and 105-32.

³³ On the *Genealogy of Morals* II: #26, as quoted by Deleuze, 170

³⁴ See also n. 30, above.

³⁵ See O. Schutte, 76-104 especially.

conventional behavior, her freedom from 'pesanteur,' casts her as the creative principle in Anne herself: a principle Anne can let free (that is, free to *recur*) by becoming 'the child,' 'the god that can dance,' 'the wisdom that is woman' (Z I: 153). This metamorphosis is only possible at the cost of adopting and exploiting Nadège's impertinent dissimulating strategies while rejecting the imitative ones of the 'herd.'

Herdlike behavior is synonymous with silence and death: such is the mother's (and, at first, Anne's) predicament. In her effort to conform to the image man and society impose upon her, she remains deaf and dumb, '[o]ften a silence directed at herself, too. She closes her eyes to herself,' as Nietzsche says in a fragment which summarizes exactly the process of self-denial that women undergo in patriarchal culture (GS II: #71: 128). Thus Nadège's self-denial, her act of uncalculated and unmitigated love for her sister, is in fact a death sentence served ultimately because she allows herself to conform, on behalf of her sister to the prevailing social codes of the island. She denies the 'maternal' in herself, the maternal being understood here as the creative, free-spirited 'artist's love for [her] work' (GS II: #72: 129),³⁶ as well as her biological condition of pregnancy. This sacrifice amounts to a kind of suicide brought about by the intransigence of Anne, who cannot tolerate Nadège's radical otherness and attempts to steal her face, appropriate her space within the economy of their specular relationship as twins because she fears disappearing into that unknown otherness.³⁷ To be absorbed into, and eventually become, what Nadège is means losing her very Western claim to a stable subjectivity. Paradoxically, though, for her as woman and as twin, this 'identity' is always already lost since it is either conformity to, and imitation of, the standards of the herd, or a reluctant copying of her double:

[S]ans cesse la crainte arrêtaït mes aveux, cette même crainte qui me faisait copier ses attitudes lorsque nous étions plus jeunes, copier, si fidèle et si recalcitrant reflet, alors que tout en moi aspirait à s'affranchir. (p. 314)

But Nadège's renunciation of the right to bear her *métis* child and her subsequent death, in effect, free Anne to become what Nadège

had been all along, 'woman' and 'maternal,' which, in the Nietzschean intertext of the narrative, means a creative artist, a writer, a spinner of webs, no longer Ariadne but Arachne (or perhaps 'Ariadne's as Shakespeare's Troilus says of Cressida), as symbol of female creativity, as Anne-(Humbert's) alter ego and textual persona. Let us not forget however that Arachne committed suicide (by hanging) when Athena, jealous of her skill in weaving, destroyed her web: talent is not a blessing for the (female) writer whose work may end up ignored, if not destroyed, by Wisdom (the Critics or the Academy). Hence the strategies of textual and intertextual dissimulation which I have tried to uncover in my analysis. This work is first of all, an entertaining and spellbinding story. It became a bestseller and received the 'Grand prix littéraire des lectrices de *Elle*, 1980' reaching a very wide readership. But it is also the creation of a writer who (self-)consciously reflects on the process of *écriture* and gestures toward a particular tradition of self-portraitists (St. Augustine³⁸ and Nietzsche) while never allowing that reflexion to interfere in the *jouissance* of the process for either writer or reader. This, according to Derrida, is the recognizable trait of a Nietzschean style. He asserts in *Eperons/Spurs* that:

Le texte peut toujours rester à la fois ouvert, offert et indéchiffrable sans même qu'on le sache indéchiffrable ... Pour que le simulacre advienne, il faut écrire dans l'écart entre plusieurs styles. (pp. 136-8)

Humbert's writing is a writing of the 'écart,' of the interval: interval between (a-)subjectivities, races, cultures, styles and languages. Interval between languages especially: her mother tongue, Creole, is the key ('le fil') which allows me, as Creole-speaking reader of her French text, to enter into the language game hidden in the proper names of her heroines and to renounce any critical reduction of her work to a single system. It is in that interval that her utopian, and Nietzschean, vision of Mauritius as 'a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise,' takes shape and becomes superimposed on the other mythical images to which the island has given rise.

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36 In *Eperons/Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1978), Derrida comments on this fragment: 'Nietzsche, as is everywhere evident in his texts, is a thinker big with thought [le penseur de la grosseur]. He is the thinker of pregnancy which, for him, is no less praiseworthy in a man than it is in a woman' (p. 65).

37 Cf. p. 427 of the book, and my 'Métissage, Emancipation and Female Textuality.'

38 See my 'Métissage, Emancipation and Female Textuality.'