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Amélie Nothomb

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**Amélie Nothomb**

Authorship, Identity  
and Narrative Practice

EDITED BY  
Susan Bainbrigge and  
Jeanette den Toonder



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## PREFACE: NOTHOMB AVEC UN B COMME BELGIQUE



Dans la ville écossaise d'Édimbourg, au mois de novembre 2001, le colloque 'Autour d'Amélie Nothomb' fut une merveilleuse occasion de deviser de la pensée et de l'œuvre de la plus jeune et la plus célèbre des femmes de lettres belges. Ces journées qui constituent la première vaste contribution scientifique à la connaissance de la diva de la littérature belge d'aujourd'hui, ont donné lieu à la publication du présent volume.

J'aimerais renvoyer d'abord au livre le plus récent d'Amélie Nothomb, *Cosmétique de l'ennemi*. Avec ce titre, elle annonce la couleur de son dixième livre: cet intitulé est un écho évident à son initial *Hygiène de l'assassin*. Au point que l'on est en droit de parler de syntagme figé: arrivée à son dixième livre publié (j'y insiste), elle marque le pas, et revient sur les lieux de son premier crime. Elle aurait pu aussi bien appeler son ouvrage *Hygiène de l'assassin Deux* ou *Hygiène de l'assassin: Le retour*. Pourquoi lui en faire grief? Reproche-t-on à un musicien ou à un peintre de revenir au même motif?

Notre auteur, on s'en est déjà bien aperçu, dans *Mercurie* notamment, aime le roman gothique et le fantastique. Mais la parution de *Cosmétique de l'ennemi* a rendu d'autant plus opportune l'organisation de ces journées d'études à Édimbourg. Ce livre garantit l'actualité du colloque, parce qu'Amélie Nothomb y rend un hommage appuyé au Stevenson de *Docteur Jekyll et Mister Hyde*. Que notre forcenée des meilleures ventes ait trouvé une part de son inspiration chez le plus illustre écrivain né à Édimbourg a donc trouvé un parfait écho académique. . .

Élargissons le propos à ce que l'on pourrait appeler le phénomène Nothomb. Car écrire un best-seller à 24 ans, publier, avec une régularité horlogère, un livre à chaque rentrée depuis lors, faire grimper impavide les tirages de ses titres jusqu'à se retrouver dans les listes des meilleures ventes avec deux, voire trois ouvrages parus chaque fois à un an de distance, faire s'entredéchirer les éditeurs étrangers à la

## PREFACE: NOTHOMB WITH A B AS IN BELGIUM



In November 2001, in the Scottish city of Edinburgh, the conference ‘A-tour d’Amélie Nothomb’ was a wonderful opportunity to discuss the philosophy and the works of Belgium’s youngest and most famous woman of letters. This was the first occasion to bring together wide-ranging academic studies focusing on the young star of Belgian literature, and it has given rise to the publication of the current volume.

May I begin by referring to Amélie Nothomb’s most recent work, *Cosmétique de l’ennemi*. The title itself sets the tone for her tenth book and clearly echoes her first work, *Hygiène de l’assassin*, to the point that we could allow ourselves to talk of her use of the set phrase. With this her *tenth* published book, she has marked time and gone back to the scene of her first crime. She could have called her work *Hygiène de l’assassin Deux* or *Hygiène de l’assassin: Le retour*. And why should we take her to task for that? Does one reproach a musician or a painter for returning to the same motif?

We have already noticed, for example in *Mercur*, that our author likes the gothic novel and the fantastic. However, the publication of *Cosmétique de l’ennemi* has made this conference in Edinburgh even more appropriate as that book itself guarantees the topicality of the colloquium: in *Cosmétique de l’ennemi*, Amélie Nothomb pays a glowing tribute to Stevenson’s *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*. How appropriate that our zealously prolific best-selling author has found some inspiration in Edinburgh’s most famous writer.

Let us broaden the context to consider what might be called the Nothomb phenomenon. Writing a best seller at the age of twenty-four, publishing a book every year since then with clockwork-like regularity, pushing up print runs of her books quite fearlessly to the point of finding herself on the bestseller list with two, sometimes even three works appearing every year at the same time, causing foreign editors

Foire de Francfort pour les droits d'un roman écrit en langue française, emporter l'adhésion des académiciens français (après avoir eu droit, insistons-y, aux lauriers de leurs confrères belges), tout cela est, reconnaissons-le, de l'ordre du phénomène. Nothomb a fait de l'exceptionnel son ordinaire.

La question est: que trouve à Nothomb sa foule de lecteurs à travers le monde? Le corpus se compose de dix livres, dont neuf romans et une pièce de théâtre, *Les Combustibles*. Les neuf romans se partagent en diverses catégories. Ceux qui font une place royale au dialogue, si grande que, la confusion aidant, la pièce fut présentée, sans vergogne, comme un roman elle aussi: il s'agit de *Hygiène de l'assassin*, des *Catilinaires*, et maintenant de *Cosmétique de l'ennemi*. Ceux qui sont écrits à la troisième personne (la trilogie *Péplum*, *Attentat*, *Mercur*), et ceux où l'auteur se raconte en disant 'je'. Cette dernière manière lui a inspiré ses meilleurs livres, et, ce qui ne gâche rien, valu ses plus grands succès: *Le Sabotage amoureux*, *Stupeur et tremblements* et *Métaphysique des tubes*.

À trois reprises, elle y explore les souvenirs hors du commun que lui ont procurés son enfance de fille de diplomate belge en Orient. *Le Sabotage amoureux* racontait ses jeux d'enfants dans le quartier des ambassades de Pékin: une sorte de *Guerre des boutons* cosmopolite et asiatique. *Stupeur et tremblements* relatait ses débuts dans la vie professionnelle au Japon, qui entraîna sa rupture définitive avec le principe de réalité. Et *Métaphysique des tubes* explique qu'il n'y a pas d'âge pour se poser les questions des fins dernières: elle s'y souvient d'un mal-être éprouvé lorsqu'elle n'avait pas trois ans, et qui la mena jusqu'à une tentative de suicide dans un étang à carpes, drame ontologique que les grandes personnes se hâtèrent bien sûr de considérer comme un accident.

Si l'on s'interroge sur le phénoménal succès de l'auteur, il est bon de s'attarder à ces trois récits (les livres d'Amélie Nothomb dépassent rarement les 150.000 signes, un lecteur entraîné les lit sur le temps d'un trajet Paris-Bruxelles en Thalys), parce qu'ils sont tous construits sur un conflit avec le monde. Dans *Le Sabotage amoureux*, l'enfant invente le réel, le construit à sa guise, y puise de profondes détresses quelquefois (l'amour sans retour, thème récurrent, est déjà présent dans ce livre), mais dans *Stupeur et tremblements* les contraintes du système social et professionnel sont telles qu'elles provoquent une révolte sans appel, et dans *Métaphysique des tubes*, il s'agit tout simplement du refus d'exister, de se mêler à la vie, d'avoir partie liée avec elle.

Les angoisses que Nothomb fait émerger au jour sont primitives, viscérales, et chacun peut s'y retrouver, ou y retrouver les premiers échos d'une sorte de tragédie originelle. Dans cette expression du mal-être foncier, de la dérégulation de se trouver *jeté-là* dans le marasme du réel, Nothomb puise des fables qui parlent à chacun de nous, pour peu que l'on se souvienne de ses premiers vertiges et de ses premiers rejets.

Amélie a trouvé son issue à elle: elle passe par l'écriture, qui lui procure un évident soulagement, et une jouissance qui peut être contagieuse. La certitude intime que ses malaises sont sans remède lui insuffle, depuis le début, un humour désespéré qui jaillit de sa phrase subtilement piégée, de son vocabulaire habilement

at the Frankfurt Book fair to fight over the rights to a novel written in French, winning the members of the *Académie française* to her cause (not forgetting, of course, the awards already made to her by their Belgian counterparts). All this is clearly in the realms of the phenomenal. What for others would be extraordinary achievements are, with Nothomb, her own usual performance.

The question is, what brings crowds of readers all over the world especially to Nothomb? The corpus consists of ten books: nine novels and a play, *Les Combustibles*. The nine novels can be divided into different categories. There are those in which the dialogue has pride of place (such as *Hygiène de l'assassin*, *Les Catilinaires*, and now, *Cosmétique de l'ennemi*) and this to such an extent that, heightening the uncertainty as to the generic nature of the text, when she did write a play, it too was unapologetically presented as a novel. There are those written in the third person (the trilogy *Péplum*, *Attentat*, *Mercurie*), and others in which the author speaks about herself in the first person. The latter method has inspired *Le Sabotage amoureux*, *Stupeur et tremblements* and *Métaphysique des tubes*, her best works, and, without in any way detracting from them, this method has also brought her her greatest success.

On three occasions in these books she explores the exceptional memories that her childhood as a Belgian diplomat's daughter in the Far East have given her. *Le Sabotage amoureux* recounted the childhood games in and around the area in Peking where the Embassies were situated, like a kind of cosmopolitan, Asian *Guerre des boutons*. *Stupeur et tremblements* told the story of her first experience of Japanese professional life, and brought about her definitive break with realism. *Métaphysique des tubes* explains that there is no 'right' age at which to wonder about mortality. She remembers a feeling of malaise when she wasn't even three years old, which led to a suicide attempt in a pond full of carp, an ontological drama that the grown-ups of course were quick to call an accident.

If we think about the phenomenal success of the author, it's worth lingering over these three stories (Amélie Nothomb's books are rarely more than 150 pages long, short enough for an experienced reader caught up in the momentum to read them in the time it takes for the Thalys to go from Paris to Brussels), because they are all based on a conflict with the world. In *Le Sabotage amoureux*, the child invents reality, fashions it as she wishes, and sometimes gets from it profound distress (unrequited love, a recurring theme, is already present in this work) but in *Stupeur et tremblements* the constraints of the social and professional structures are such that they provoke a revolt that permits no going back, and in *Métaphysique des tubes* it is a question quite simply of refusing to exist, to be involved in life, to play any part in it.

The anxieties that Nothomb brings to light are primitive, visceral, and anyone can identify with them, or recognize in them the first echoes of a kind of primal tragedy. By voicing that fundamental uneasiness with self, by depicting what it feels like to find oneself abandoned in the midst of life's dreariness, Nothomb creates fables that have meaning for every one of us, if only we can remember our first moments of disorientation and the first time we felt rejection.

Amélie has found her own solution: through the act of writing, which brings her

sélectionné. Son hygiène mentale passe par le style, qui est souvent brillant, parce qu'un cynisme de bon ton y va de pair avec une drôlerie d'excellente compagnie. Amélie Nothomb a été bien élevée, et elle ne le renie pas, elle sait comment décocher des flèches assassines sans se départir d'un sourire d'hôtesse exemplaire. Elle est, en ce sens, la digne héritière de ces grandes bourgeoises et aristocrates qui ont su déboulonner avec toute l'élégance voulue les univers où elles se débattaient: elle est, tout compte fait, proche de Jane Austen, de Louise de Vilmorin, mais qui seraient devenues belges.

Car Amélie Nothomb, avec un b comme Belgique, est belge, comme son illustre nom l'indique, et elle ne se soigne pas pour autant, trop certaine, comme elle le dit dans son avant-dernier livre, que Dieu l'est certainement aussi, puisqu'elle eut la certitude, autour de trente-six mois, d'être son incarnation.

obvious relief and an enjoyment which can be contagious. Being absolutely convinced that her suffering is incurable instils from the beginning a desperate humour which wells up from her carefully double-edged phrase, and from her cleverly selected vocabulary. Her often brilliant style plays a crucial part in ensuring her mental well-being because a tasteful cynicism goes hand in hand with a perfectly matched comedy. Amélie Nothomb has been well brought up, she does not deny this and she knows how to shoot deadly arrows without losing the perfect smile of the society hostess. In that sense, she is the worthy heiress to those great middle-class and aristocratic women who knew how to dismantle with such elegance the worlds in which they struggled. She is, all said and done, close to what Jane Austen or Louise de Vilmorin would have been, had they been Belgian.

For Amélie Nothomb, with a b as in Belgium, is Belgian, as her illustrious name indicates. She does not make a big issue of the fact, since, as she says in her penultimate book, *God is too*, because she was convinced at the age of thirty-six months of being his incarnation.


Translated by Susan Bainbrigge and Jeanette den Toonder





## INTRODUCTION

### Biographical Information

 Amélie Nothomb, of Belgian origin, was born in Kobe, Japan, in 1967. A diplomat's daughter, she grew up in the Far East, and was seventeen before she visited Europe. So totally different was it from what she had imagined through her extensive reading of European literature that the experience was to inform her development as a writer. She studied Romance Philology at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*, but more importantly, she also started writing during this period, a time in which she felt alienated and misunderstood. Struck by what she terms a chronic writing disease ('la maladie de l'écriture'), Amélie Nothomb has become a famously prolific writer who published her first novel at the age of twenty-five. In particular, winning the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française* in 1999 for *Stupeur et tremblements* has really put her name on the literary map.<sup>1</sup>

Now based in Brussels and Paris, she attracts a variety of readers, from teenagers to performers and theatre directors keen to dramatize her work, to the literary establishment (initially causing a flurry of interest when *Hygiène de l'assassin* was suspected by one well-known editor of being a hoax from an established author and definitely not the work of a novice).<sup>2</sup> She is said to please her audiences because her novels are short reads as well as being highly imaginative, a blend of dark humour and comical reflections, intellectual tour de force and comedy. In each work, she combines the acutely personal with grand philosophical questions about the nature of existence. This ability to combine the public and private, the microcosm and the macrocosm so deftly is perhaps in part due to her particularly cosmopolitan upbringing, Nothomb even referring to herself as 'une apatride belge', the seemingly contradictory terms somehow encapsulating her peculiar position in which Belgian identity is both affirmed and renounced.<sup>3</sup> She has been known to refer to herself, albeit slightly tongue-in-cheek, as 'une héritière du sur-réalisme belge'.<sup>4</sup> And yet this association is not that far-fetched, given the ways in

which she juxtaposes fact and fantasy, overturns conventions, mocks and parodies institutions of all kinds, and uses intertextuality to surprise and provoke the reader.

Nothomb's phenomenal success goes far beyond Belgian and French borders, as her work has been translated into thirty languages (German, Catalan, Danish, Dutch, Greek, Japanese, Polish, Russian to name but a few). Despite this worldwide interest, to date only four titles have been translated into English, and no full-length study of the author exists in English.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is hoped that this volume will bring the writing of this prize-winning author to a wider audience.

It will become evident that Nothomb's oeuvre flouts genre conventions and defies facile literary classification. Many genres are represented within the body of her work: autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts, science fiction, fantasy, rewritings of fairy tales, epics and myths. Margaret-Anne Hutton has observed that despite the variety in Nothomb's wide-ranging oeuvre, one recurring factor common to all her works can be traced: conflict of all kinds.<sup>6</sup> If sparks fly in all directions in the author's dialogues, meeting with her could not be more different, and we are grateful to Amélie Nothomb for granting us permission to print the interview in this volume.

### A Brief Synopsis of Amélie Nothomb's Works

Prétextat Tach, protagonist of Nothomb's first novel, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992), is an arrogant, vulgar and misogynistic hulk who has just won the Nobel prize for his literary oeuvre of twenty-two novels. He treats his opponents, five journalists who have come from all over the world to interview him, with the greatest contempt. The novelist's cruel cynicism and coarseness—journalists are, in his opinion, mere parasites living off creators whose work they haven't even read—quickly scare away the first four. But the last one, Nina, who knows his books in great detail, discovers the horrible secret that lies hidden in his literary works: as an adolescent, he strangled his cousin Léopoldine to prevent her from becoming a woman. In his own view, he saved her by giving her eternal youth. At the end of a biting and dazzling dialogue, the female journalist puts the monstrous Tach quite literally to silence. For this debut Nothomb received two prizes: the *Prix René-Fallet* and the *Prix Alain-Fournier*.

The second novel, *Le Sabotage amoureux* (1993), was also awarded the *Prix Alain-Fournier*, as well as the *Prix de la Vocation* and the *Prix Chardonne*. In this autobiographical text, Nothomb describes the closed world of a compound of foreign diplomats and their children in communist Beijing between 1972 and 1975. The narrative perspective is that of a seven-year-old girl. This young first-person narrator considers her bike to be a horse, quotes Wittgenstein and Baudelaire, reflects on beauty and war, ridicules adults and falls in love with the ravishing Elena. This authentic, absolute love is both fantastic and tragic, because unrequited. The story of 'loving sabotage' takes place in a setting of violence and ugliness, as the

children, encompassing a variety of nationalities, are absorbed in one particular game: that of reliving their own Second World War.

A state of war also constitutes the background of *Les Combustibles* (1994), to date Nothomb's only play. In a besieged city, three characters—a Professor, his assistant Daniel and the student Marina—have taken refuge in the Professor's apartment. Outside, the bombing and shelling continue, whilst inside the pressing question of survival centres around one particular issue: how to fight against the cold? The only combustible item left in the house is in the Professor's library: his books. Soon the protagonists not only ask each other which book should be saved for last, but, more perversely, which book is worth giving up one single moment of physical warmth.

In *Les Catilinaires* (1995), yet another confined space constitutes the setting of the devastating events that ruin the lives of the protagonists. A retired couple, Émile and Juliette, have just moved to a house in the woods where they hope to quietly spend the last years of their life together. Their calm solitude is however cruelly disturbed by their obese neighbour, Palamède Bernardin, who, every day between four and six o'clock, invites himself into their house, gets himself settled down, hardly saying a word. His presence and silence drive the couple to distraction and the absurdity of the situation is enhanced when they discover the existence of Mme Bernardin who is so corpulent that she can hardly move. However, when Émile decides to act against the rude neighbour's undesired infiltration into their space, the roles of perpetrator and victim slowly become blurred . . . For this black comedy the author received the *Prix Paris Première* and the *Prix du jury Jean-Giono*.

The title of the fourth novel refers to a woman's garment that was worn in ancient times: *Péplum* (1996). In a book that combines science fiction, satire and historical events, ancient past and future times are linked together through the burying of Pompeii under the ashes of Vesuvius, in 79 A.D. During a short stay at the hospital, the writer A.N. wakes up in the 26<sup>th</sup> century and discovers that this volcanic eruption was provoked by future scientists in order to preserve the most beautiful example of a classical city. Her encounter with one of the major instigators, the scientist Celsius, results in a heated conversation in which a great number of topics are discussed. These include the great war that took place in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century; abstract issues such as the virtual and the real; travelling in time, but also timeless issues such as art, philosophy and morality.

In *Attentat* (1997) we are presented with the very unappealing Epiphane Otos, who, despite being aesthetically challenged with few redeeming features in the personality stakes, manages to become the darling of the modelling world, 'ambassadeur de la monstruosité internationale', and who falls in love with the young and beautiful Ethel. Like many of Nothomb's works, the theme of beauty is paramount, yet as the reference to Baudelaire confirms, 'Le beau est toujours bizarre' (A 39). This introduces us to the pathological extremes to which the protagonist will be driven in pursuit of the woman he desires. In an overturning of platitudes about beauty, Epiphane takes the reader on a fantastical journey, via his erotic and violent adolescent dreams, to his quest for Ethel which will take him to Japan, and to her

violent death at his hands, ultimately leaving him with only his solitude and memories of her. *Attentat* concludes with Epiphane's contemplation of his murder of Ethel while he is imprisoned. Musing on his current situation, he notes that now he will have plenty of time at his disposal to write. Imprisonment is not as bad as all that, he ponders.

In *Mercure* (1998), the theme of freedom and imprisonment is pursued, in a mock Gothic tale. *Mercure* tells the story of the young Hazel Englert, who, since she was orphaned (in 1918), leads a secluded life on an island off the coast of Cherbourg with an old man, Omer Loncours. Led to believe that she has been badly disfigured by the bombardment which killed her parents, she is kept from seeing her reflection: there are no mirrors in the house, nor is there anything that would offer a reflection. Omer employs a nurse to look after Hazel. Françoise Chavaigne arrives and is dumbfounded by the ways in which her employer and her charge lead their lives. She makes it her mission to enlighten Hazel about her situation (the fact that she is not hideously disfigured but of breathtaking beauty), but will find to her horror that when she finally gets the chance to expose the old man's deception, Hazel's response is perhaps not what she had bargained for.

*Stupeur et tremblements* (1999) is written under the auspices of autobiography. Claimed to represent a year spent as a *stagiaire* in 1990 for a Japanese import-export company, the narrator takes us through the ritual humiliations at the hand of her superiors that become a fact of life, as she descends ever lower in the corporate ladder, finally ending up as a 'Dame Pipi'. A text that provoked outrage as well as acclaim, Nothomb sets up and dismantles stereotypes, in a genre which blends the real and the surreal. Amélie-san can one minute be describing her struggles with her boss's expense accounts, the next minute be cavorting naked out of hours in the office, or contemplating the vertiginous drop from the window . . . Funny, eloquent and imaginative, office politics and the abuse of hierarchies are all too recognizable in this compelling tale.

In *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000) the author takes us further back in time, to the portrayal of the narrator as an infant. What is more, an infant who thinks she is God. The first three years of the child's life in Japan are depicted from the perspective of an interior monologue in which the child's power to name even takes on biblical proportions. Family anecdotes become existential dramas in which the narrator has to overcome obstacle after obstacle to survive, questioning the ways of the world in the process.

Finally, the intimate dialogues of the earlier works bring the narrative in Nothomb's most recent publication, *Cosmétique de l'ennemi* (2001) back to the *huis clos*. Set in an airport lounge, two voices are heard in dialogue. One of them belongs to Jérôme August, the other to Textor Texel, an enigmatic other whose true identity is revealed at the end to be none other than August's alter ego. He remorselessly pursues August, so desperate is he for an ear to listen to his 'confessional', despite August's protestations; he is racked with guilt about a murder he believes he may have committed as a child, haunted by an 'ennemi intérieur',

yet insistent at the same time in bringing his interlocutor's actions into perspective: the fact that it is August who is suspected of killing his wife and who effectively tortures himself via the words of Texel to the point of his own self-destruction.

### Introduction to the Essays in this Volume

In the first section, 'Autobiography and Gender', questions concerning the juxtaposition of true and verifiable biographemes with situations and characters exaggerated to the point of the absurd will be discussed in relation to theories of reading and gender identity. Despite the fantastical and the absurd, the reader's disbelief is suspended all along as childhood becomes the nostalgic centre which offers the possibility of freedom to choose one's own gender. A sense of injustice concerning gender and the discovery of individual identity seem to coincide in the fragments of the author's childhood described in the autobiography.

In her article, Hélène Jaccomard examines the consequences that Nothomb's three autobiographical works, *Le Sabotage amoureux*, *Stupeur et tremblements* and *Métaphysique des tubes* have on the autobiographical pact. Jaccomard argues that memories in Nothomb's tales of childhood insist on the search for identity through language. Language expression is at the heart of the formation of the protagonist's metaphysical, national and gender identities, to the extent that storytelling is an inherent part of Nothomb's autobiographical style. Nothomb's personality remains a *self in fabula*, and is thus uncommitted to truth-telling.

The issue of gender inequality is discussed by Désirée Pries, who focuses on the image of the carp in *Métaphysique des tubes*. Through the dual image of the carp in this work—carps are a symbol for the masculine, but they are also evoked in feminine terms—the autobiographical account of Nothomb's earliest childhood memories is studied as a metaphor for the traumatic transformation of a young girl's body, which indicates the passage of childhood to adulthood. Pries demonstrates that the girl's attempt to remain pre-adolescent—by becoming anorexic or attempting suicide—results in a redefinition of the female body and in the conception of an alternative feminine identity.

Female and male bodies are the objects of study in the second section of this volume, 'Representations of the body'. In the first article of this section, Victoria Korzeniowska examines formal aspects of the presentation of the body in Nothomb's writing through elements of the fantastical and by focusing on the power of imagination. In *Stupeur et tremblements*, the patterns of the heroine's bodily movements play an important role in the construction of her reality and are counteracted by the use of imagination. Korzeniowska illustrates that corporeal interaction with space and the creative potential of imagination allow for resistance, subversion, transgression and free-thinking.

The idealization of female bodies, on the contrary, seems to reduce the freedom of stunningly beautiful female characters such as the young Hazel in *Mercur*, who

lives in sequestration because her seventy-seven year old ‘protector’ yearns to possess her beauty. In a number of Nothomb’s novels (for example *Hygiène de l’assassin*, *Attentat* and *Les Catilinaires*), the sublime beauty of a female protagonist contrasts sharply with a hideous male ‘monster’. This image of an incompatible couple blurs commonplace conceptions that associate thinness with virtue and fatness with evil. Catherine Rodgers argues that the real nature of Nothombian beauty resides in its thinness, its virginity and its asexuality, which leaves no room for a female, adult, sexual body. Hence the promotion of an anorexic alternative that enables the female characters to maintain their childlike angelic appearance. They are flanked by hideous individuals: these are repulsive males whose objective is to control the Other.

Lénaïk Le Garrec explores this contrast between beauty and ugliness through the representations of male and female characters. In her study, the mirror plays an essential role, as this magical element not only reveals the protagonists’ physical appearance, but also Nothomb’s different conceptions of self. If the mirror confirms beauty, as in fairytales, and confronts—mostly male—characters with their unattractive features, it is also stressed that its nature can be deceptive. By focusing on the deceitful characteristics of angels and monsters, Le Garrec shows that Nothomb’s works disrupt the established order by rejecting the norms of beauty, thus putting our superficial society on trial. Philippa Caine further explores the rupture of common dualisms by considering the deconstructive inscriptions of female corporeality in Nothomb’s narratives. Caine uses the notion of ‘entre-deux’ writing to examine the associations of women’s bodies with slenderness and beauty as well as with corpulence and abjection. These elements are related to certain dogmas of (Western) discourse—such as phallogocentric fears of the ‘fleshy’ female body—that are effectively exploited in Nothomb’s oeuvre.

In the final contribution of this section, Jean-Marc Terrasse proposes to tackle the representation of monstrosity by using the Derridean notion of the ‘monstre événementiel’. Terrasse’s poetic exploration and deconstruction of male and female demons and angels focuses on their voices and silence, and on the ways in which they seek to enslave or love each other.

In the section devoted to Narrative Practice, the essays engage, to greater and lesser degrees, with the entirety of Nothomb’s oeuvre. They focus on stylistic aspects of her work and authorial preoccupations, in particular the use of dialogue; the role of humour; intertextuality and the relationship between author and reader; questions of authorship, status and canons of literature; linguistic virtuosity and figures of language; beginnings and endings.

Amélie Nothomb’s ear for dialogue brings her (often monstrous) characters to life, whether it’s the domineering writer Prétextat Tach of *Hygiène de l’assassin* who reduces all journalists to quivering wrecks, or the hideously ugly Epiphane Otos, the domineering protagonist of *Attentat*. Shirley Jordan explores this important feature of Nothomb’s narrative practice in terms of the author’s meditation on the interpersonal dynamics of power, analysing the presentation of combative relationships and paying attention to two particular arms in the author’s weaponry: erudi-



tion and wit. She explores the function of the author's dialogic games in a broader context in order to assess their pertinence as vehicles for philosophical enquiry.

Claire Gorrara then examines the status of the author and authorship in the debate on literature's value to the individual and the collective which is presented in *Les Combustibles*. In this play, the values espoused by a trio in an unknown city under siege are put under the spotlight. Pursuing the intertextual vein here, parodic reworkings of genres such as *littérature engagée* raise important questions about the status of authors and critics, highlighting the demands upon the reader to be attentive and erudite too. The relationship between the erudite author and the literary world, and what Jordan calls her 'poetics of virtuosity', is then explored in terms of intertextuality by Susan Bainbrigge, who questions the nature of the relationship between author, intertext and reader in *Mercurie*, paying particular attention to Nothomb's fascination for 19th century Romantic and Gothic literature. In this hybrid text the reader can only wonder at the image of the vertiginous 'escalier anachronique', an unstable escape route which enables the heroine of the story to flee her captor, and perhaps also a metaphor for the author's own writing practice.

In David Gascoigne's essay, parody and irony emerge in his study of the wide-ranging and highly coloured figures of language in Nothomb's textual landscapes. Within Nothomb's 'poetics of excess', he examines the origins of the voice, whether at its source an irritant, an intruder, or an unwelcome arrival in an ordered world provoking the primal scream. He charts in various texts the overwhelming feeling of power that is garnered by the act of naming, not forgetting the author's ritual or incantatory use of language as another means of reaching more searching and visceral levels of expression and provocation.

Laureline Amanieux identifies one particular influence on Nothomb: the image of Dionysus, and the pervasiveness of images of doubles and duality in her texts. She presents and compares several examples of Dionysian characters in order to demonstrate the ambivalence and necessity of their 'sublime' feelings and their monstrosity, and then goes on to argue that the author combines these dual feelings in the creative momentum of writing itself.

Linguistic skill is matched by complex narrative strategies; in particular, endings are the focus of articles by Mark Lee and Marinella Termite. Lee explores the writing of childhood's end in Nothomb's works, by drawing up an inventory of threshold scenes in different texts, and assessing the varied representations of them and their importance in the creation of the author's literary voice. Termite looks more generally at the ways in which the author concludes, especially her use of role reversal and alternative endings in texts which mirror the destructive titles assigned to them. Termite argues that Nothomb disrupts and subverts her narratives, defying in the process generic codes and conventions.

Andrew Wilson and Adriana Hunter's translations mark an important turning point in making Nothomb's works available to an English-speaking audience. They recount here the trials and tribulations of translation, offering insights into the process itself, and revealing personal affinities with the author which emerged

as they grappled with the linguistic virtuosities of her prose. To close the volume we are delighted to present the transcription of an interview conducted with the author in January 2002 in which we discuss with her a number of the questions raised at the conference in the presentations and discussions.

### Notes

1. Full references for Nothomb's works are listed in the bibliography.
2. See Yolande Helm, 'Amélie Nothomb: "l'enfant terrible" des lettres belges de langue française', *Études Francophones*, 11 (1996), 113–120 (p. 113).
3. 'De toute façon, je ne me sens bien nulle part. Cela s'appelle être apatride, j'imagine. Et cependant, si je ne suis chez moi nulle part, je n'en suis pas moins une apatride belge', in 'Une Apatride belge', *Belgique toujours grande et belle*, Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles (1998), ed. by Antoine Pickels and Jacques Sojcher (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1998), p. 409.
4. See interview in this volume, and Yolande Helm, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
5. Scholarly articles on Nothomb's writing are listed in the bibliography.
6. '[...] si l'œuvre d'Amélie Nothomb échappe à la classification, on y retrouve pourtant un facteur commun sous la forme de trois niveaux de conflit: individuel (les personnages s'affrontent); collectif (mention de guerres dans tous les textes); lutte entre l'auteur et le lecteur', in "'Personne n'est indispensable, sauf l'ennemi": l'œuvre conflictuelle d'Amélie Nothomb', in *Nouvelles Écrivaines: nouvelles voix?*, ed. by Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 111–27 (pp. 111–12). See also Évelyne Wilwerth, 'Amélie Nothomb: Sous le signe du cinglant', *Revue Générale*, 132, 6–7 (June–July 1997), 45–51.



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