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JACQUELINE HARPMAN'S TRANSGRESSIVE DYSTOPIAN FANTASTIC IN "MOI QUI N'AI PAS CONNU LES HOMMES": BETWEEN FAMILIAR TERRITORY AND UNKNOWN WORLDS

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JACQUELINE HARPMAN'S TRANSGRESSIVE DYSTOPIAN FANTASTIC IN *MOI QUI N'AI PAS CONNU LES HOMMES*: BETWEEN FAMILIAR TERRITORY AND UNKNOWN WORLDS

The francophone Belgian writer Jacqueline Harpman has been gaining increasing critical attention, in particular since the publication of her fantasy tale *Orlanda*, a rewriting of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, which won the Prix Médicis in 1996.¹ This article proposes to analyse the question of writing the fantastic in another of Harpman's works, the bleak dystopian text published just before *Orlanda*, entitled *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes*.² In this work, which is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*³ (and listed, since it was translated into English, on the 'Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy and Utopia' website),⁴ a group of women find themselves imprisoned in some kind of non-specified bunker, 'au milieu d'une terre inconnue' (*MH*, p. 68). They have no idea how they came to be there, and no prospect of release from a grim existence of constant surveillance by male guards and the bare necessities to survive. Among them is the young narrator, who has never known a life any different, having been imprisoned for as long as she can remember. The women manage to escape only to spend the rest of their lives wandering unsuccessfully in search of other signs of life. Gradually their numbers decrease as the women die, leaving the main protagonist and narrator eventually to face their deaths alone. The novel is framed by the opening and concluding scenes in which the narrator recounts her setting down on paper of her story as death is imminent.

The text, which is set in a barren post-apocalyptic landscape, resists easy genre classification. Indeed, we might ask whether it is a truly 'fantastic' text when some of the features of the story are rooted in a recognizably concrete setting, albeit unspecified in terms of time or space, or when references to guards and incarceration might lead us to think that the narrative has more

This article is based on a paper presented at the conference 'The Fantastic in Contemporary (post-1980) French Women's Writing', IGRS, London, 20–22 September 2007. I am grateful to Professor Margaret-Anne Hutton for her feedback on that paper.

¹ See, for example, my 'Experimenting with Identity in Jacqueline Harpman's *Orlanda*', in *Hybrid Voices, Hybrid Texts: Women's Writing at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. by Gill Rye (= *Dalhousie French Studies*, 68 (Fall/Winter 2004)), 99–107.

² First published in 1995 by Éditions Stock. References to the text here are to the Poche edition (Paris, 1997), abbreviated to *MH*.

³ (London: Cape, 1986). In Atwood's novel the problem of infertility caused by environmental pollution in Gilead results in the fertile women being held as 'handmaids' to bear children.

⁴ <<http://feministsf.org/authors/wsfwriters.html>> [accessed 9 October 2007]. Within the science fiction genre Harpman's text could also be compared with Élisabeth Vonarburg's *Chroniques du pays des mères* (Montreal: Littérature d'Amérique, 1992). I am grateful to Emmanuelle Lacore-Martin and Jean-Xavier Ridon for suggesting this author as a point of comparison.

in common with the universe of the concentration camp than that of the fantasy novel. If we consider Tzvetan Todorov's now well-known and wide-reaching definition of the fantastic, we have a starting-point for our analysis of Harpman's text. He writes:

In a world which is indeed our world [. . .] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality [. . .]. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous [. . .].

The possibility of a hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect.⁵

Throughout Harpman's oeuvre, a fascination with fantasy, rather than fantastical, worlds recurs (with 'fantasy' understood according to Roger Cardinal's definition to mean 'a more-or-less light-hearted play with the impossible and the imaginary').⁶ Fantasy as 'otherness' in various guises—for example, other worlds, or the 'other' within the self, whether as alter ego or fantasized double—is a dominant characteristic of Harpman's writing. The fantasy world in *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* leaves many uncertainties in the reader's mind, especially as far as questions of time, space, and genre are concerned. Given the various narrative turns, thematic concerns, and bleak ending, to be examined in due course, I shall consider the text's relationship to the fantastic dystopian tale, highlighting in the process the various ways in which it is situated generically, formally, and thematically as a liminal 'in-between' work. This is a positioning which would appear to confirm certain theoretical positions advanced in the literature on the fantastic. By considering the date of publication of Harpman's text, on the cusp of the millennium, its place on a utopian/dystopian continuum, and its central thematic concerns, I shall argue that *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* is characterized by liminality and can best be understood as a transgressive dystopian work.

⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), trans. by Richard Howard as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), pp. 25–26. He goes on to specify certain conditions: 'First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character [. . .] the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work [. . .]. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations' (p. 33).

⁶ Entry on 'The Fantastic' in *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, ed. by Peter France (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 298. For an analysis of the emergence of 'the Fantastic' as a literary mode see Claire Whitehead, 'The Fantastic: An Enduring Literary Mode—Introduction', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 44 (2008), 353–62.

The author's interest in dystopia places her within a certain lineage of women writers who have been drawn to the dystopian genre, defined by Dunja M. Mohr in her study of contemporary female dystopias as 'utopia's devilish generic sibling and antonym, [. . .] predominantly a modern literary phenomenon of the twentieth century'.⁷ 'Monotonous conformity, surveillance, denunciation, and the degradation of humans to object status are the standard features of dystopia', according to Mohr (p. 33). In dystopias, she notes, women writers frequently engage with questions of female sexuality and the female body, in societies identified as having patriarchal structures at their root which 'trap' women; the genre is then frequently deployed to highlight 'the flaws of ailing contemporary society' (pp. 36, 28). Mohr identifies in her corpus certain transgressive aspects, and these lead her to coin a new subgenre of 'transgressive utopian dystopias'. She finds a utopian undercurrent within the dystopian narrative, which, for example, imagines feminist alternatives for the future as opposed to existing realities (p. 45).⁸

This analysis begins by considering *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* within the genre of the literary fantastic, particularly within this strand of 'dystopian' fiction, and more specifically women's dystopian fiction. As Neil Cornwell reminds us, 'the theme of the *fantastique* has long been a regular feature in French literary criticism'.⁹ Cornwell provides an overview of attempts to theorize the 'fantastic' in literature: this encompasses Freud's 'psychologizing the fantastic' and Todorov's study, which highlighted in particular the realms of the 'marvellous' and the 'uncanny'.¹⁰ He also notes Eric S. Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature*, where the latter claimed in a broader vein that 'all art, all mental wholes, are, to some extent at least, fantastic'.¹¹ This comment

⁷ *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2005), p. 27.

⁸ Mohr goes on to argue: 'By merging and hybridizing utopia and dystopia traditionally defined as antinomies—sometimes situated in a science fiction frame—and presenting utopia and dystopia as interactive hemispheres rather than distinct poles, feminist literary utopias and dystopias in particular contest the standard reading of utopia and dystopia as two discrete literary subgenres and expose the artificiality of rigid classifications' (pp. 50–51).

⁹ *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 56. For a recent overview of the genre in French see Denis Labbé and Gilbert Millet, *Le Fantastique* (Paris: Ellipses, 2000).

¹⁰ *The Fantastic*, p. 6. Marta E. Sánchez explains Todorov's 'uncanny' as 'the story that presents unbelievable events and resolves them with a rational explanation', and the 'marvellous' as resolving 'incredible happenings by recourse to supernatural laws', with the 'pure fantastic' text characterized by 'the "hesitation" or experience by the reader as he or she tries to decide between a natural or supernatural explanation for the events in the narrative' ('A View from Inside the Fishbowl: Julio Cortázar's "Axolotl"', in *Bridges to Fantasy*, ed. by George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, and Robert Scholes (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), pp. 38–50 (p. 39)).

¹¹ *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 215. He also writes that 'Much modern experimental fiction is based on a widely felt need, regardless of genre, to create narrative worlds that depend on an increase in the use of the fantastic' (p. 179), and

certainly supports the use of the 'fantastic' label in this case, and indeed, Jeanne Paque has already remarked in her analysis of *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* that there is a 'fantastique de base présent chez Harpman', reminding us also of the importance in francophone Belgian literature of the fantastic genre.¹²

How does a dystopian vision present itself in Harpman's text? M. Keith Booker argues that 'the treatment of imaginary societies in the best dystopian fiction is always highly relevant more or less directly to specific "real world" societies and issues'.¹³ He specifies that dystopian literature works by a process of 'defamiliarization', in which unfamiliar settings provide the backdrop to explore social and/or political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted in a familiar setting.¹⁴ *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* combines the familiar and the unfamiliar in ways that make us question even the extent to which Harpman's text belongs to the genre of the fantastic, since beyond the cataclysmic events that occur, much of the text resists unequivocal categorization as 'fantastic fiction', or even 'science fiction'; many ordinary events are described but in an other-worldly setting.

It is a desolate universe: the women are imprisoned together in an underground bunker, the reason for which is never explained in the text. We are presented with a dystopian more than a utopian society, perhaps not surprisingly, given the events of the twentieth century, as Roslynn Hayes reminds us in her study of science, myth, and utopia: 'Yet it is not surprising that the twentieth century, plagued by two World Wars and a succession of escalating regional conflicts, by totalitarian regimes and existential *Angst*, has been more notable for its deeply pessimistic dystopias than for its utopian visions'.¹⁵ Harpman's novel straddles both a recognizable and 'realistic' setting (with

considers narratives 'as arrayed along a continuum, ordered in terms of increasing use of the fantastic' (p. 28). This is a burgeoning field in literary studies. See also, for example, Lucy Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996); Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981); Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and the special issue on the Fantastic in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 44.4, ed. by Claire Whitehead (October 2008).

¹² 'Un fantastique au féminin pluriel: Jacqueline Harpman et Caroline Lamarche', in *Couloirs du fantastique*, ed. by Ana González Salvador (Bologna: CLUEB, 1999), pp. 139–55 (p. 154). See also her 'Vie et mort d'une cité de femmes ou le sursis par l'écriture chez Jacqueline Harpman', *Women in French Studies*, 5 (1997), 89–96.

¹³ M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Portsmouth, NH: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 19. Booker refers to prominent female-authored dystopian texts, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *He, She and It* (*ibid.*, p. 23).

¹⁴ *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 3–4.

¹⁵ 'Science, Myth and Utopia', in *Twentieth-Century Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and*

references, for example, to books on shelves, tinned conserves in store rooms etc.) and an other-worldly, post-apocalyptic landscape (where beyond the bunkers, it is clear that some kind of devastating disaster has taken place, suggested by the description of a barren plain with no signs of life).

If we examine the text more closely, rather sinister clues can be traced in the narrative that point towards some of the possible explanations for this bleak dystopian existence, although ultimately no explanation is ever given. Reference is made to 'la catastrophe' (*MH*, p. 37), and to 'des cris, des flammes, la bousculade' (*MH*, p. 57) to describe the disaster. Further clues to indicate that there is something sinister going on include the fact that the women are imprisoned in some kind of underground shelter; that they discover stores of frozen food and preserves; that they hear sirens, and, once freed from the bunker, find no other signs of life. There are only corpses in other underground caves, and overground more corpses in a lone bus noticed by the narrator in the middle of a desert. The narrator uncovers gas masks and identical gardening books in the belongings of the dead men on the bus ('Manuel Abrégé de Jardinage', in which 'on y expliquait comment planter, semer, repiquer, biner, sarcler, à quelle saison, quelles plantes et selon quelle orientation' (*MH*, pp. 164–65)). One can only speculate then on whether the masks and books were supposed to protect and assist with recovery from some kind of major disaster. We also learn that seasons have disappeared (*MH*, p. 103). Thus the future that the author has visualized seems to be a particularly stark one in which the suggestion of some kind of environmental or nuclear disaster provides a further point of reference for analysis of the text. The reader can only speculate as to why gas masks can be found alongside the corpses in the bus, for example. The dystopian credentials of the text would appear, then, to be clear.

However, in *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* we cannot ignore some of the more life-affirming events and activities in the text that create a framework infused by utopian ideals, and where Mohr's framework seems particularly fitting. For example, in the depictions of the community of women we see the fruits of co-operative, non-violent relationships (albeit set against a bleak, dystopian landscape). Indeed, it is in this light that Lorie Sauble-Otto has traced a more positive narrative strand in the text through the motif of female creativity, suggesting that the critical context of the work differs from that of the 1970s and 1980s, and arguing that 'the 1990s and the millennium provided a backdrop for the exploration of the post-feminist, post-modern female protagonist striving for her survival and her identity'.¹⁶ It is in this

Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature, ed. by Kath Filmer (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 8–22 (p. 8).

¹⁶ 'Writing to Exist: Humanity and Survival in Two *fin de siècle* Novels in French (Harpman, Darrieussecq)', *L'Esprit créateur*, 45.1 (Spring 2005), 59–66 (p. 59).

respect that she stresses the importance of writing as the 'one chance of survival' for the female protagonist, where 'telling one's own story becomes the way to survive and the only way to be human' (p. 65), even though, as she notes, there is little hope for any future for the narrator in Harpman's text. Sauble-Otto's conclusion is that such a work represents an example of 'subversive creativity', where the body represents an 'embodiment of the crisis of identity at the turn of the millennium' (p. 66).¹⁷ Paque, in another article on Harpman, also draws positive conclusions from the text based on the ways in which the female community works together, writing that:

cette cité inédite est le lieu de l'imagination; à défaut d'inventer vraiment, les femmes vont développer leurs compétences, augmenter leurs capacités technologiques. Sinon dans la création, au moins dans l'exploitation, c'est comme si elles reconduisaient à grands pas toute l'histoire de l'humanité. C'est à ce moment-là qu'on peut croire à l'utopie d'une société féminine harmonieuse, et pourquoi pas, à travers elle, à l'invention d'un nouveau modèle social.¹⁸

To support this approach one could cite the fact that the text does focus on a female community (that manages itself very well), and, via the female narrator, highlights the latter's curiosity about the specifically female experiences that she has not known or experienced, such as menstruation and childbearing.¹⁹ However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that this is an *enforced* community of women and not one chosen by them. This combination of utopian and dystopian themes would thus appear to support Mohr's framework: the text manifests both utopian and dystopian elements and corresponds to a reading practice focused on the liminal 'transgressive utopian dystopia'.

Following this consideration of genre, a further in-between positioning concerns the date of publication of the text, in 1995, and its relationship to questions of periodization. Is there an argument to be made for a pre-millennial novel of disquiet? Harpman's bleak dystopia was followed the subsequent year by Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes*, a work that has been analysed convincingly (by Catherine Rodgers and Lorie Sauble-Otto, for example) as one that portrays a twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle* malaise.²⁰ For

¹⁷ Sauble-Otto notes (p. 62) the extent to which the female narrator is a marginalized body (outwith heterosexual norms; a 'body that doesn't matter', using Judith Butler's terminology from *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993)).

¹⁸ Paque, 'Vie et mort d'une cité de femmes ou le sursis par l'écriture chez Jacqueline Harpman', p. 95.

¹⁹ On specifically female experiences, the narrator writes towards the end of her life: 'Je ne dois pas être très âgée, si je suis sortie de la cave aux environs de quinze ans, je dépasse à peine la soixantaine. Les femmes disaient que, dans le monde d'avant, l'espérance de vie montait à plus de soixante-dix ans. Mais il y fallait des soins médicaux. Là-bas, j'aurais eu des règles, des enfants et mon utérus inutile n'aurait pas pourri' (*MH*, p. 191); 'Il est étrange que je meure de l'utérus, moi qui n'ai jamais eu de règles et qui n'ai pas connu les hommes' (*MH*, p. 192). See Sauble-Otto, 'Writing to Exist'.

²⁰ *Truismes* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996). Rodgers writes in the English abstract of her article on

Michèle K. Langford, a '*fin de millenium syndrome*' is one in which, 'The nostalgia produced by the end of an era and the anxiety brought forth by the beginning of a new one are magnified by the myths surrounding the events to befall humankind after the year 2000'.²¹ There would seem to be more to be said about those texts published in the period immediately preceding the new millennium, in terms of the deployment of the fantastic in reflecting contemporary society's anxiety about the future. Indeed, Langford argues that 'It [the fantastic] does not constitute merely an escape from reality, as is often stated; instead, it allows us to visualize what the future may bring and thus to focus our fears'.²² It could be argued that the publication of *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* in the approach of the (twentieth-century) *fin de siècle* reinforces certain key themes in the work concerning anxiety about the unknown, often in relation to the increasingly technologically controlled world in which we live; the word evokes uncertainty, and imagined and real threats posed by changing times. What is more, the text's resistance to providing definitive answers or explanations regarding the women's fate, as we shall see, magnifies the theme of angst. The text's emergence at a time when one century is coming to an end, and the world is on the brink of a new era, fits the emerging pattern of liminality that seems to characterize *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes*.

The (inconclusive) conclusion is a source of frustration for the reader, and this uncertainty reinforces central themes of the text and offers scope for further commentary as regards the precise nature of this dystopian landscape. As readers, we are placed in a situation where we need to read between the lines of the story to try to make sense of it, and to wonder how and why the women come to find themselves in this extreme situation. More questions are asked than answered and the narrative frequently frustrates in its resistance to providing explanations. As readers, we oscillate between the familiarity of certain recognizable settings and patterns of behaviour, and the alienating landscape of the post-apocalyptic terrain and scenarios that are beyond our ken. The text's resistance to narrative closure is also an obvious transgressive

Truismes that 'The themes of *Truismes* epitomize our fin-de-siècle aspirations and anxieties' and are 'symptomatic of the malaise and the loss of direction which characterize our post-modern age' ('Aucune évidence: les truismes de Marie Darrieussecq', *Romance Studies*, 18 (2000), 69–81 (p. 69)).

²¹ 'Introduction', in *Contours of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Eighth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, ed. by Michèle K. Langford (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990), pp. ix–x.

²² *Ibid.*, p. x. Likewise, Cornwell identifies 'a strong social, political and ethical thrust' in the twentieth-century fantastic (*The Literary Fantastic*, p. 211). Mention could also be made of the fact that the text lends itself to other critical approaches (the psychoanalytical immediately springs to mind, given Harpman's career as an analyst). Such a framework might engage with, for example, expressions of the return of the repressed, death drives or death wishes manifested via apocalyptic visions etc., and imagined transgressions. Equally, more formalistic analysis could be undertaken in the Todorovian vein, tracing, for example, the 'inscription of hesitation' in the text.

feature, and reminds us again of Mohr's emphasis on transgressive dystopian traits.²³

In addition, the 'in-between' positioning of the text referred to earlier can also be traced in more detail through the thematic concerns of the work: within the context of a twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle* dystopian fantastic, Harpman's explorations of, for example, ecological concerns, cultural anxiety, and ethical and ontological questions can be highlighted. If we consider the first of these themes, we see that the fantastic has often been used as a vehicle to explore modern ecological concerns. Colin Manlove writes: 'One might also say that modern fantasy is at least as much ecological as moral, involved with the protection of endangered environments as much as with the spiritual health of the protagonist.'²⁴ In *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* the women rely on stores of tinned foodstuffs in the absence of any possible exploitation of the land, and the future appears to be a somewhat limited prospect, given the absence of men, and limited supplies necessary for survival. Is the land now totally barren? The reader is left again to wonder whether this is a man-made or natural disaster, with no definitive answer given. This lack of knowledge in turn builds an uneasy tension in the narrative and arouses a desire to fill in the blanks by responding to the reader's fears and imagining the worst possible ecological disaster scenario.

As far as anxiety is concerned, associating the fantastic with existential unease is not, of course, new.²⁵ In *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* these mental states are evident in the various narrative scenarios that are depicted, from the imprisonment of the women at the beginning, to their subsequent release and search for meaning in a world devastated by a major disaster. However, the imprisonment of the women bears similarities to a concentration camp narrative (the women are kept in an enclosed space, and under surveillance by guards with whips), an aspect which grounds it in a concrete socio-historical context, whereas the description of the women's lives beyond the bunker moves to 'other-worldly' terrain and few explanations or markers are offered to explain how the world has become as stark and desolately populated as appears to be the case. The ways in which the women manage their anxiety and unease in these very different settings are described in detail and will be considered further. What can be emphasized at this stage is a pattern in which

²³ Mohr, *Worlds Apart?*, p. 53.

²⁴ 'Victorian and Modern Fantasy: Some Contrasts', in *The Celebration of the Fantastic: Selected Papers from the Tenth Anniversary International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, ed. by Donald E. Morse, Marshall B. Tymn, and Csilla Bertha (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 9–22 (p. 20). See also his study *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

²⁵ Rosemary Jackson notes, for example: 'Given that there seemed to be a common agreement that the fantastic was to do with some kind of existential anxiety and unease, Todorov sought an understanding of *how* literary fantasies produce such an effect' (*Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 26).

recognizable 'concrete' scenarios are juxtaposed with 'unreal' ones: the concentration camp with the alien landscape; the pursuit of knowledge with the reality of certain 'unknowns' and 'unknowables'; life and the survival instinct brushing with death and the desire for assisted suicide; etc. This pattern of oscillation characterizes the themes of the work and reinforces the theme of liminality, identified thus far in terms of genre and time-frames.

If we look in more detail at these various dystopian themes in the narrative, it can be argued that Harpman's 'dystopian fantastic' is used to make comments about perennial concerns as the narrator embarks on an exploration of what it means to be human, albeit in a society reduced to just a small community of women. We might consider the various ways in which the women deal with their anxieties about the unknown: for example, attempts to create structure and meaning, including the use of rites and rituals, and related quests for knowledge and control, come to the fore. This desire for control is accompanied by a narrative that underlines both real and existential imprisonment and absurdist themes. The pursuit of purposeful activities certainly fits in with a key theme of the book: the human desire to know, to understand, to classify. Order is created out of disorder, for example, when the narrator discovers the dead men on the bus, a scene noted earlier: they had been uniformed, armed, and equipped with gas masks (*MH*, p. 158). She gathers and sorts their belongings before burying them, announcing in the text in quasi-biblical tones: 'Le cinquième jour, tout était en ordre' (*MH*, p. 165). The search for understanding appears as an essential feature of the human psyche, juxtaposed again with the frustration at not having all the answers, in particular for the narrator, whose curiosity remains unsatisfied in so many areas (about what the world is like, about what men are like, about what her compatriots have known in their lives before imprisonment). The women have to deal with the fact that they know so little about their situation; as one character states: 'nous allions mourir l'une après l'autre sans avoir rien compris à notre histoire et, les années passant, toute interrogation s'effiloche' (*MH*, p. 125). The narrator also describes the other women's reluctance, or inability, to talk to her about their previous lives ('la vie d'avant').²⁶ As we have seen, the desire to find out what is going on is also frustrated since, even at its conclusion, the book refuses to satisfy the reader's curiosity about what has really happened in this bizarre dystopian landscape. As Paque states, 'Or l'aventure naît ici de l'inconnu et même du désir de maîtriser cet inconnu.'²⁷ The quest for knowledge and understanding is thus a thematic motif in the text, but also functions in terms of the narrative structure of the work, as the reader's desire to understand will remain unfulfilled at the end. This ex-

²⁶ She is determined to glean information from the other women, especially concerning sexuality and reproduction.

²⁷ 'Un fantastique au féminin pluriel', p. 145.

ploration of a universal predicament—in this instance the existence of certain ‘unknowables’—reinforces the pattern of existential questioning that runs through the text.

Certain aspects of the women’s imprisonment, as mentioned earlier, set up parallels with concentration camp testimonies, and related contemporary texts (for example, fellow Belgian Amélie Nothomb’s ‘univers concentrationnaire’ in *Acide sulfurique*).²⁸ In fact, given Harpman’s credentials as a francophone Belgian author, we might ask whether her work could be classified within a specifically Belgian ‘fantastic’.²⁹ Although the many diverse intertextual echoes in Harpman’s work (the Poche edition back cover compares the text to Kafka and Auster, for example)³⁰ suggest at first glance that it would be difficult to pin down specific characteristics particular to a Belgian corpus at this stage, the recent work by Nothomb on similarly dystopian themes would certainly lend weight to an argument highlighting the Belgian fantastic as an enduring literary mode.³¹ Harpman’s work has in common with her fellow francophone Belgian’s novel a carceral society, albeit in a very different context. *Acide sulfurique* is a story about prisoners under close surveillance: it is a dystopian version of a contemporary reality TV show entitled ‘Concentration’, in which the presenters/guards are named ‘kapos’, and the prisoners, ‘détenues’. This somewhat rebarbative plot uses dystopia as social criticism and raises the question of social compliance; if dystopia is ‘the worst of all possible worlds’, then we are certainly presented with a dystopian society that lives up to its name. In both works, survival strategies under duress come to the fore, in particular for Harpman’s story.

In *Moi qui n’ai pas connu les hommes* these survival strategies are evident from the ways in which the women create routines and structures for

²⁸ (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005). *L’Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris: Pavois, 1946) is the title of David Rousset’s book on the legacy of the Holocaust.

²⁹ See, for example, Benoît Denis’s introduction to *Du fantastique réel au réalisme magique*, ed. by Denis (= *Textyles*, 21 (2002)), pp. 7–9, for information on francophone Belgian theorizations of the fantastic. He writes: ‘Dès 1975, Jean-Baptiste Baronian indiquait d’ailleurs, dans la préface à son anthologie *La Belgique fantastique* (Verviers: Marabout, 1975), que le fantastique en Belgique francophone s’était développé dans les années 1920 autour de deux pères fondateurs, Jean Ray et Franz Hellens, la distinction des deux auteurs recouvrant implicitement la distinction entre le fantastique “classique” et le “fantastique réel”, l’un des avatars en Belgique du réalisme magique’ (p. 7; see Baronian, p. 9). See also *Fantastiqueurs*, ed. by Marc Lits (= *Textyles*, 10 (1993)), and Marc Quaghebeur, *Anthologie de la littérature française: entre réel et surnaturel* (Brussels: Racine, 2006).

³⁰ Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* (New York: Penguin, 1987), for example, also explores a devastated world via the eyes of its central female protagonist. The back cover of the Faber and Faber edition (London: 2005) describes the novel as ‘the story of Anna Blume and her journey to find her lost brother, William, in the unnamed City. Like the City itself, however, it is a journey that is doomed, and so all that is left is Anna’s written account of what happened.’

³¹ Paque argues for a specificity of ‘un fantastique au féminin’ and notes a lacuna in studies focusing on Belgian francophone women writers and the genre of the fantastic, in ‘Un fantastique au féminin pluriel’, pp. 140–41.

themselves, from the organization of domestic tasks to the funeral rites they perform in this shrinking community (this includes singing, praying, and leaving markers at burial sites: *MH*, p. 116). Indeed, the reason the narrator gives for her efforts over three days to bury the skeletons of the men she discovers in the abandoned bus is that 'je voulais marquer que, quoi qu'il nous fût arrivé, nous étions de la même race, celle qui honore les morts' (*MH*, p. 164). The narrator also recognizes, on seeing a dead man in one of the bunkers, the need to die with dignity: 'Un long frisson de chagrin me parcourut, moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes, devant celui-ci, qui avait voulu surmonter la peur et le désespoir pour entrer roide et furieux dans l'éternité' (*MH*, p. 144). The routines reflect a desire to make meaning out of meaninglessness, and to achieve a semblance of control where effectively the women have very little control over their fate. Thus the narrator tracks time (by, for example, monitoring her own heartbeat: *MH*, pp. 50–54), and the women create occupations for themselves (playing games, styling their hair, building houses, learning carpentry, and other skills), even though these are 'objectively' pointless.³² They build houses, create a community, and even build a cemetery. Thus in the face of existential uncertainty come numerous responses, immersion in day-to-day concerns being one of them. Harpman explores other manifestations of this universal predicament via her dystopian narrative. Even the nature of some of the women's conversations and activities, which concern the day-to-day details of life when they are in the grip of potentially life-threatening circumstances, is reminiscent of a Beckettian-style dialogue of the absurd. The use of rites and rituals is particularly marked, and is offered as further evidence of what a 'common humanity' might mean.

Also in the context of survival strategies, references to the ways in which the women respond to their treatment by the guards (who refuse to address them by their names) convey their resistance to dehumanizing practices. The narrator refuses to be reduced to the anonymity of the crowd, insisting on her individuality, her stance reinforced by the first-person narrative itself: 'Pour eux, nous n'avons pas de nom, ils nous traitent comme si rien ne nous différenciait les unes des autres. Moi, je suis moi. Je ne suis pas un quarantième de troupeau, une tête de bétail parmi les autres' (*MH*, p. 45). The use of the word 'bétail' here reminds us of the way in which humans were herded like animals in accounts of life in concentration camps. In Margaret-Anne Hutton's study of concentration camp testimonials by French women mention is made of the

³² They gain satisfaction from work ('Nous allâmes à trois semaines de marche du premier village et nous construisîmes dix maisons [. . .]. Ce fut un gros travail mais qui, naturellement, nous donna beaucoup de plaisir': *MH*, p. 124). This approach supports Freud's well-known views on work and love as core components of human life: 'The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love', in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), XXI, 101, n. 42).

survival strategies adopted by French women prisoners. These find parallels in Harpman's text: the women are incarcerated in primitive conditions, wear makeshift clothes fashioned from rags, and are constantly under the watchful eye of the guards, with only the bare necessities to survive.³³ Hutton identifies in certain accounts an element of 'keeping up appearances', the fashioning of clothes and exchange of recipes alongside other domestic occupations, all of which served to forge a sense of community among the women and offered a certain 'emotional sharing'.³⁴ The absence of privacy or of dignity (revealed by references in accounts to communal nudity, or enforced headshaving, for example, and widespread physical violence)³⁵ also finds parallels in Harpman's text. Finally, for various reasons, many of the women would lose their reproductive capacities,³⁶ and this is the fate of our narrator, who writes of her arrested development ('puberté avortée': *MH*, p. 47), resulting from the 'catastrophe'.

A further area in which it is possible to recognize binary patterns from the specificities of this story is in the presentation of an overwhelming survival instinct, on the one hand, counterbalanced by its opposite, the request for assisted suicide. The ethical questions posed by the latter serve also as reminders of the links in the text to ongoing debates. The survival instinct manifests itself in the pursuit of meaningful activity, even in the face of an absurd existence, as explored earlier in terms of routines and rituals, which are maintained even in extreme circumstances. Living is also viewed, none the less, as a means simply to delay dying: 'les femmes découvraient que survivre n'est jamais que reculer le moment de mourir' (*MH*, p. 126).³⁷ After the experience of discovering the bus and the skeletons, we read of the narrator's sense of wonder, and determination to live: 'Je sentis le poids de l'inexplicable, de ma vie, de cet univers dont j'étais l'unique témoin. Je n'avais rien d'autre à y faire que continuer à cheminer. Un jour, j'y mourrais. Comme les gardes' (*MH*, p. 166). One might ask whether this is a *Candide*-style expression of the 'cultiver son jardin' approach. The narrator bears witness to the strength of the survival instinct but also to the extent to which the loss of the will to live comes from psychological as well as physical exhaustion. In fact, over the years she becomes a mercy killer, agreeing to requests from the other women for assisted suicide.³⁸

To summarize, the structuring of the narrative around questions of life and

³³ Margaret-Anne Hutton, *Testimony from the Nazi Camps: French Women's Voices* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 123, 128. See *MH*, pp. 26, 30, 31, 35.

³⁴ *Testimony from the Nazi Camps*, pp. 130–33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁷ At times dreams are also preferable to life (*MH*, p. 167).

³⁸ See e.g. *MH*, pp. 123, 140. Some of the women commit suicide without requiring the narrator's assistance (Marie-Jeanne, for example: *MH*, p. 105).

death, rites and routines, knowledge and understanding, presents a fantasy tale whose concerns are none the less very much rooted in the 'real', a text in which, for example, funeral rites offer a means to cope with the finality of death. The narrative scenarios can be read with past, known historical events in mind, as well as in a post-apocalyptic context, and both support classification of the work within the genre of the transgressive dystopian fantastic. Harpman's text is a particularly salient example of a tale with a contemporary twist on *fin-de-siècle* angst. In his study Cornwell refers to Christine Brooke-Rose's reference to all types of fantasy narrative having what she calls 'some point of anchorage in the real, since the unreal can only seem so as against the real'.³⁹ I would argue here that Harpman's 'dystopian fantastic' combines a troubling and particularly bleak scenario in an alien landscape with disturbingly familiar points of comparison with past 'real' horrors, alongside a contemporary commentary on human behaviour, and physical and psychological survival strategies. Harpman's text is one that is characterized by in-between positionings, both generically and thematically, in which she skilfully combines the prosaic and the fantastic: many everyday, 'universal' questions are tackled. Both dystopian and utopian, published on the cusp of the twenty-first century, the narrative moves both forwards and back, its community of women doomed to death yet desperately hanging onto what vestiges of human life remain. Harpman's 'in-between' tale thus engages the reader in an experience that is both eerily recognizable and frighteningly alien—encompassing both familiar territory and unknown (but possible) worlds.

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³⁹ Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 81, cited in Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic*, p. 25. T. E. Apter, in a similar vein, but emphasizing more the potential effects of the fantastic text on the reader, also refers to the fact that 'the initial impact of fantasy is its deviation from the norm' (T. E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 111, cited in Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic*, pp. 26 and 217).