That’s the way you’re built,’ my father said.
But I can change! My cocoon’s shedding.
I want to walk in the snow and not leave a footprint.

Richey James Edwards, ‘4st 7lb’

Quant au riche avenir, NDiaye’s first published novel, appeared in 1985, when she was aged just seventeen. One assumes that she could have been no more than fifteen or sixteen when she began to write it. ‘Ce n’était pas le premier texte écrit, très loin de là’, she states. ‘C’était la énième. Mais c’était le premier que j’imaginais montrable en tout cas’ (Asibong and Jordan, 2009: 190). When one actually reads the novel and remembers the age of the person who wrote it, the experience is quite unsettling. There is something uncanny about the maturity of the psychological analysis it contains, reading as it does like the work of an old person who has been worn out by the world, and who is now focused wholly on the construction of the perfect sentence that will encapsulate her disillusionment. Add to this precocious lucidity the fact that NDiaye would go on five years later to publish a fourth novel as contemptuous, baroque and genuinely revolutionary (in terms of its implications about the functioning of racialization in contemporary Europe) as En famille (1990), and it begins to feel appropriate to think about NDiaye in the same kinds of prodigious terms as Rimbaud, Radiguet or Anne Frank. It would appear that she herself had, from the outset, conceived of herself as someone destined to be exceptional:

J’avais dix-sept ans, le bac approchait, après le bac je devais choisir que faire et je me disais: ‘Il faut que je sois déjà écrivain pour ne pas être
The First Novel Cycle

obligée de faire quoi que ce soit d’autre [...] Il faut que je fasse en sorte de n’avoir aucune espèce de diplôme afin de m’obliger à être rien d’autre qu’un écrivain. (Asibong and Jordan, 2009: 190)

The first three novels – Quant au riche avenir (1985), Comédie classique (1987) and La Femme changée en bûche (1989) – can, in many ways, be viewed as spectacularly agile performances by a brilliant and extremely young woman determined to prove, via the medium of literature, that she can, as the key protagonist Fanny will put it, ‘tout faire’ (EF, 72). Lydie Moudileno (2009) argues that throughout her writing NDiaye can be seen to be demonstrating, via plot, her heroes’ anxiety, and even the tacky slogans on the clothes of some of her minor characters, a constant awareness of what it means to be found ‘fauteuil’, to be lacking in the necessary knowledge of cultural codes that permit entry into the desired strata of society. Her novels, suggests Moudileno, especially these early exercises in stylistic and grammatical ‘excellence’, function as the proof that she, NDiaye, does possess the appropriate array of dazzling gifts and tools and accordingly will be granted access to the literary ‘castle’. It is certainly true that NDiaye made an impression on the judges. Even if it was not until the 2000s that she could be said to have attained the heights of literary stardom in France – with Rosie Carpe (2001), Papa doit manger (2003) and Trois femmes puissantes (2009) and the Prix Femina, Comédie-Française endorsement and Prix Goncourt that these texts brought her respectively – ever since the publication of the early novels NDiaye was hailed by critics as a truly singular new talent. The fourth, En famille, quickly began to be discussed as a modern classic, and initiated a lengthy discussion of NDiaye in the context of serious academic criticism. The works were hailed as simultaneously brilliant and meaningful, a joyous marriage of impeccable style and truly important, ‘universal’ themes and concerns. The influence of Proust and Henry James was noted with regard to the first two novels, and that of Kafka on the following three, and NDiaye, at the same time as being conceded significant originality, was credited with the supremely good taste of borrowing from exactly the right set of precursors.

It is indisputable that the five novels published between 1985 and 1994 were examples of a young writer who had grasped exactly how to perform her talent in such a way that she would dazzle even the harshest critic. Quant au riche avenir pulls off its teenage homage to Proust with wonderful warmth and wit. Many of the hinge moments in the book occur around Proustian motifs of transformational insight:
Marcel’s time-travelling madeleine gives way to young Z’s psychically gluey clafoutis, while the miraculous hawthorns of Combray are transmogrified into young Z’s cataclysmic poplar trees. The same can be said for the presence of Kafka in En famille. Quite apart from the castle- and court-like dimensions of Fanny’s dreadful village family, the attentive reader is treated to such glorious grace notes as when Fanny contemplates, à la Georg Bendemann of ‘The Judgment’, throwing herself into the lake in order to show her aunt Colette just how seriously she takes the latter’s accusations of disloyalty. She is dissuaded from her suicidal impulse by an ice-cream proffered by the (still furious) aunt. NDiaye not only knows and loves her modernist masters and their motifs, then, but is able to push them adroitly onto new postmodern ground, as emotionally devastating as it is often hilarious. There is a sense in which the young NDiaye shows herself to be the ultimate ‘gifted child’, crafting weighty, entertaining, difficult narratives which at the same time clearly mark out their status as new cultural objects belonging in a hallowed European line. And, like the gifted children described by Alice Miller in her heretical post-psychoanalytic study (1987), NDiaye and her protagonists can be read as preoccupied, at a deep psychic level, with the challenge of pleasing their caregivers – family, patrons, the structures of the nation itself – with their gift of perfect observation. These texts may be accomplished on the one hand and pleasurable on the other, but they also reflect ceaselessly, via their protagonists’ anxious concerns and increasing feelings of emptiness, on their need to be both impressive and pleasing. All five novels function as analyses of the syndrome that has produced their impressive selves, locating its roots in processes of personality splitting and emotional disinvestment. As Leslie Hill puts it in his exploration of Quant au riche avenir, this text uses language as a vain attempt to mask ‘impending emotional disaster. This is language not as revelation but concealment, words used as a kind of rampart, designed seemingly to ward off distress, but only in the full, anxious knowledge that whatever words are meant to protect against has insidiously and unavoidably already taken root within them’ (2000: 182). All five of these early novels take the reader on a journey towards textual disintegration under the force of the weight of ‘genius’ that has produced them, a genius that is completely unable to relax in the unselfconscious acceptance of its own basic legitimacy.

Donald Winnicott makes a crucial point when he notes that ‘relaxation for an infant means not feeling a need to integrate, the
mother’s ego-supportive function being taken for granted’ (1962: 61). NDiaye’s first five novels chart the disintegration of essentially orphaned subjects who are desperate to find acceptance. Uncertain of the solidity of either parental or societal support, these early protagonists are unable to relax, so preoccupied are they with the rigours of integration as a reward for the display of outward perfection. These are all tales of a radical falling apart as the result of an over-zealous attempt at fitting in. But the manner in which this falling apart plays out over the five novels shifts dramatically. The novels stage, in increasingly bizarre manners, their own disintegration as texts. If Quant au riche avenir and Comédie classique seem predicated on various demonstrations of structural and stylistic seamlessness (perfectly constructed sentences and hyper-lucid consciousness in the first; classical focus on unity of time, place and action in the second; middle-class male protagonists in both), by the time of the third and fourth novels the narrative begins to split into various, often incoherent perspectives, and the original protagonists (both marginalized women) are shoved violently out of the story of which they are the self-appointed heroines. The settings of all five novels eschew realism: these are not attempts to represent in ‘reasonable’ terms the settings of late 1980s and early 1990s France. But while the environments of the first two novels are merely quaint (the protagonists appear to move in circles reminiscent of a 1950s French film), the narratives after La Femme changée en bûche unfold in flagrantly dream-like landscapes, fantastical and postmodern.

This shift towards a more oneiric setting for the texts is echoed in the form taken by the later protagonists’ disintegration. They are more extreme, more physical, more deranged. Young Z and the narrator of Comédie classique may feel as if they are falling apart inside, but the protagonists of the third, fourth and fifth novels actually metamorphose: into logs, pebbles, spectres and gaseous or liquefied versions of themselves. The instability at the heart of already anxious texts shifts, we might say, from neurotic to psychotic. The protagonists of La Femme changée en bûche, En famille and Un temps de saison may ‘lose’ their bodies, transformed as they are into non-human or post-human forms, but, paradoxically, they are in the first place given slightly more clearly defined bodies than young Z or the narrator of Comédie classique. These first two narrators are totally de-corporealized, never described in physical terms. Neither is there any indication that their (male) bodies have any signification in the world in which
they live. The protagonists of the third, fourth and fifth novels are subtly marked, however. The reader is given to understand that their bodies are found somehow wanting within the societies in which they move: these texts begin to offer a subtly politicized context for the problem of disintegration. Never actually naming ‘race’ as a factor in the heroes’ falling apart, NDiaye’s novels between 1990 and 1994 start to practise what we might, following Thelma Golden (2001), describe as ‘post-black’ art.2 Her texts evoke a state of abusive racialization but, rather than blankly repeating the linguistic and ideological codes of that racialization, attempt – ironically, via the practice of a kind of blankness – to undo them.3

The Melodious Child Dead in Me: Quant au riche avenir (1985)

Quant au riche avenir, the first of NDiaye’s published novels, functions as a commentary on all her future writing. It dissects, in almost essayistic fashion, the psyches of later fictional protagonists, whose lack of articulacy with regard to their own behaviour renders them fantastically opaque. The text can also be read as a tantalizing explication of some of the more confusing aspects of NDiaye’s own public persona. Seeming to look forward to a time when the author would be not only celebrated but when would-be analysts such as myself would dream of interpreting her with reference to her published fictions, the text playfully reflects on the complex implications of such a hazardous biographical-critical enterprise:

[C]ependant, lorsque, plus tard, il aurait l’occasion de fréquenter certain écrivain, assez célèbre, et même de pénétrer suffisamment dans son intimité pour être frappé des concordances exactes qui existaient entre la vie du personnage et l’œuvre, où l’auteur ne s’exprimait d’ailleurs jamais autrement que par la voie de la première personne, le jeune Z devait remarquer à plusieurs reprises qu’il n’était jamais fait mention, dans l’existence quotidienne de l’écrivain, par ses proches de tel ou tel sentiment, anecdote, décrits par ce dernier, ou alors qu’on les citait de façon impersonnelle et sans penser particulièrement à l’auteur, dont il n’était pourtant ignoré de personne qu’il avait livré son âme entière à ses lecteurs : il semblait qu’il se fût dédoublé, ou subtilement, harmonieusement scindé en deux parties symétriques, de sorte que l’être projeté, si on le reconnaissait pour le sosie parfait de l’écrivain, conservait pourtant une propre personnalité, un tempérament, des traits particuliers, tels qu’il eût paru aussi offensant de s’en référer à lui pour
More than a conventional novel, then, *Quant au riche avenir* is a microscopically nuanced psychological essay about what it means to carry paradoxical feelings that seem so violently in contradiction with one another that they threaten to tear the very self apart. The self in question is that of a teenage boy – ‘le jeune Z’ – who appears to be on his way to an adult state of depression. The tripartite narrative is a step-by-step post-mortem of young Z’s trajectory towards a kind of ‘soul death’. This is in stark contrast to the later works which tend to ‘perform’ an already existing psychic blankness in extreme form, with neither explanation, nor lamentation, nor meta-commentary.4 *Quant au riche avenir* is clearly a text that NDiaye had to write in order to set down with as much analytical clarity as possible her single greatest preoccupation: the problem of emotion’s gradual expiry. Here, the problem is examined carefully, using all the words that are needed, before later texts, their narrators themselves mostly affectless and zombified, can go on to experiment with that same preoccupation in a more truly ‘post-emotional’ manner.

Young Z, still at school and living at home (like the young NDiaye at the time of the text’s composition) tries to be a ‘true self’ and to make genuine connections with others – his girlfriend, his aunt, his schoolmates – but, for various reasons, finds that he cannot. And so begins his drift into melancholia, schizoid splitting, and an almost intolerably moving flirtation with the possibility of withdrawal from psychic – and perhaps physical – life. The author kills off young Z’s parents in the opening sentence, telling the reader that, owing to early orphandom, our hero was brought up by ‘une vague tante’ (QRA, 7). This is the first move in NDiaye’s seemingly endless experimentation with different forms of literary parricide, as the series of novels, stories and plays that follow present, almost without exception, protagonists whose mothers and fathers are either physically absent or, as is more usually the case, so emotionally distant and unresponsive as to be as good as dead. The figure of young Z’s aunt, known simply as ‘Tante’, will come, as in so many of NDiaye’s subsequent narratives, to represent the possibility of a new and better caregiver (both respectable and emotionally fulfilling), only for her ‘family romance’ alternative to be found, in its turn, to pose new, perhaps even greater problems for the protagonist.5
On the novel’s opening page we are given a remarkable, almost comically excessive, amount of psychological information about our young hero: the emotional distance between young Z and Tante has played a part in the development of his troubled personality: anxious, narcissistic, self-flagellating and, to a certain extent, paranoid, young Z is obsessed with finding meaning in existence through the hyper-reflective activity of writing and the analysis of others, while at the same time terrified of truly scrutinizing himself and so admitting the more painful, embarrassing or contradictory aspects of his behaviour. The narrator later insists in particular upon young Z’s pronounced tendency towards mental and intellectual over-activity, a tendency that coexists with feelings of grandiosity (‘la vanité du jeune Z était immense’, QRA, 104), ‘une humilité parfois excessive’ (QRA, 104), feelings of invisibility (‘on ne lui prêtait guère plus attention que s’il n’avait pas existé’, QRA, 104) and debilitating loneliness: ‘Il était seul’, we are told, ‘et rien ne lui semblait moins romanesque’ (QRA, 106). Young Z’s silent, paranoid hostility towards seemingly innocuous figures in his life – such as the boy in his class who is useless at Latin prose translation – is related with a comical deadpan articulacy, at the bottom of which the chortling reader nevertheless cannot help but feel pity for the protagonist’s apparent inability to relate to anybody in a straightforward manner: ‘Il se mit à craindre ses contemporains comme les fomenteurs de quelque mystérieux complot tramé à ses dépens, dont, peut-être, il fallait voir dans la personne du garçon stupide et si mauvais en thème, qui avait de bonnes raisons de le jalouser, l’instigateur principal’ (QRA, 106). Banal (if irritating) characters and incidents assume the heights of tragic persecution, while any possibility of a ‘good enough’ relationship seems to get snuffed out by young Z’s inability to trust the other person.6

Two relationships seem to hold out the promise of something emotionally real and satisfying for young Z, but both founder on the rocks of paranoia and self-hatred. Just over halfway through the novel we are told about a desire that unexpectedly grips young Z as he is returning home from school one day: he longs for Tante to have made him a moist and gooey cherry _clafoutis_ for his tea. Since Tante habitually prepares dry biscuits, the fantasy is far from likely to be fulfilled. And yet, lo and behold, what does young Z find waiting for him when he gets home but a moist and gooey cherry _clafoutis_, prepared by Tante’s loving hand: the boy nearly faints from surprise and pleasure. The episode is more than a knowing teenage nod to the potential psychic intensity of a neo-Proustian teatime. In Tante’s
quasi-fantastical fulfilment of her nephew’s deepest wish for a certain form of nourishment, NDiaye sketches the contours of a care-giving relationship that has the potential for satisfaction, a relationship wherein the caregiver can, at least on occasion, sense the unstated fantasies and desires of her charge, and offer to fulfil them with a quasi-magical sensitivity. In this wonderful moment of ‘unreasonable’ needs unexpectedly met, we witness young Z perceiving the possibility of emotional communication within relationships, a glimpse of the good news that love and dependency need not end in frustration and despair. The incident, we are told, ‘lui sembla révélateur de liens profonds qui existaient entre lui et Tante’ (QRA, 66), and young Z is able, for a time, to feel pleasure and pride in the confirmation that Tante truly loves him. But the period of reassurance is short-lived. Young Z soon gives way to a renewed doubt about the reality of his intimacy with Tante. He is haunted by anxieties about her fantastical metamorphosis, as she dreams, into someone unrecognizable, ‘un terrain glissant’ (QRA, 70), and these anxieties quickly lead him back towards a position of defensiveness and emotional disinvestment: ‘Il était alors distant non par appréhension mais par fierté, pour ne pas avoir l’air, face à Tante qui se cantonnait dans une sévérité sans cause, d’en être touché en lui faisant des avances’ (QRA, 70). His feelings for his aunt eventually change back into a condescending pity. There is no real connection between them, he surmises, and she is a depressed and depressing woman: ‘Que Tante persévérât à vivre était pour le jeune Z un mystère que ne parvenaient à élucider ses plus grands efforts d’imagination’ (QRA, 83). And, later still: ‘il se surprenait de plus en plus souvent à l’appeler “Pauvre Tante”’ (QRA, 93). As for the unexpected schoolboy friendship with Blériot, it too seems, for one miraculous moment, to be too good to be true, before rapidly disintegrating into something that is cut-off, paranoid and dead. Like some kind of adolescent angel, the mysterious classmate Blériot – ‘tout enluminé de délicatesse et de bonté’ (QRA, 107) – surges out of nowhere to offer young Z companionship and conversation, apparently expecting nothing in return. Very quickly, however, young Z begins to feel a kind of repulsion towards his new friend, whom he experiences as being uncomfortably similar to himself (QRA, 109–10). Blériot’s openness about himself and about failings which young Z recognizes as common to them causes young Z to shut down completely, freezing his new friend out of the intimacy which has so suddenly sprung up between them:
Il le rabrouait, furieux, tâchait, afin de l’obliger à se taire, de lui montrer l’aspect méprisable de ce qu’il avançait avec tant de fierté; ou bien il se cantonnait dans un froid silence qui soulignait si désagréablement sa totale incompréhension de ces choses que Blériot finissait, malheureux, par ne plus oser ouvrir la bouche. (QRA, 110)

Young Z prefers disingenuous cruelty to a closeness he finds embarrassing; in order to avoid feelings of intimacy, he splits into different variously rejecting, hypocritical and blankly disavowing selves, all motivated into emergence by the unshakable, ignominious conviction that the contemptibly honest Blériot is his ‘double moins réussi’ (QRA, 111).

Instead of cultivating the seeds of closeness to be found in a relationship such as this, young Z seems doomed – like every one of NDiaye’s subsequent protagonists – to flounder in pursuit of unattainable phantoms. The first third of the novel is devoted to the dissection of his obsession with a girlfriend known simply as ‘l’amie’, a sort of teenage version of Proust’s Odette, whose tantalizing blankness sets her up as the first in a series of spectral NDiayean love-objects. (These will find their most iconic form in the mythical Tante Léda of 1990’s En famille and the ghostly women in green of 2005’s Autoportrait en vert.) Young Z’s love for his girlfriend is predicated entirely on his painful clinging to her absence, an absence mitigated only by occasional, unsatisfying ‘dates’ in the centre of Paris (the girl lives in the provinces), or else by the infrequent arrival of boring, emotionally disengaged letters. ‘Sans le réaliser nettement’, we are told, ‘il avait fait de cette double absence, physique et épistolaire, la raison principale de son amour’ (QRA, 18).

Strangely indifferent to his affection, ‘l’amie’ is also impossible to interpret, always leaving young Z with the sensation of a vague and foggy presence that is utterly resistant to penetration. The insipid texts she sends him from time to time are all he has to sustain his frenzied desire. He waits for them to arrive in the manner of a furious baby, dreading the ‘désarroi qu’il ressentirait si rien n’arrivait ce jour-là’ (QRA, 13). But not only do they fail to arrive within the period of what Winnicott might call tolerable frustration – when they do arrive they contain no nourishing emotional content whatsoever:

La jeune fille cependant ne l’entretenait que d’affaires trop vagues et de portée trop étroite, insuffisamment en relation avec eux-mêmes, pour que le jeune Z pût alimenter ses convictions, effacer ses doutes ou croire seulement que les lettres de son amie complétaient de quelque manière que ce fût la connaissance qu’il avait d’elle. (QRA, 39)
The drops of ‘letter-milk’, when they come, then, are entirely without taste, and young Z’s infantile anguish is more acute than ever. Like the later ‘real’ NDiayeian baby Titi, son of the depressive Rosie Carpe, young Z can do no more than suck at a mysteriously unresponsive nipple. The comparison between young Z’s emotionally unreachable girlfriend and his actually dead parents is one that the boy himself draws. In a remarkably analytical passage near the denouement of this opening section devoted to ‘l’amie’, the narrator declares:

Et elle était morte pour lui au même titre que ses parents dont, s’il les voyait vivre, c’était dans l’espèce d’immématérialité fantomale, lointaine et blanche, où il feignait de croire qu’il ne croyait véritablement, par désir de ne pas paraître à ses propres yeux hideusement réaliste, que vivaient les morts. (QRA, 59)

Unable to internalize the reality of what he has come to experience, affectively speaking, as an intolerably spectral presence, young Z gradually switches off. He trains himself not to feel the full force of his pain; he splits himself into various fragments: a non-empathic, disinvested self looking down condescendingly on the suffering one. He spends hours composing ‘un visage approprié, détendu et calmement expectatif’ (QRA, 25). In short, he undergoes a process of what André Green (1983) describes as ‘blank mourning’. The sixteen-year-old NDiaye, incredibly, offers her reader a detailed, fictionalized account of the psychic processes first described just five years previously by Green in his description of the various stages of shutting down in children of so-called ‘dead’ mothers. And, like Green, NDiaye appears to be noting that such children will usually be drawn, in later years, to love-objects exuding precisely the same qualities of spectrality that they experienced as infants. Young Z drifts back and forth, then, between different kinds of deadness: from the literal non-life of his biological parents to the perceived emotional deathliness of Tante; from the ghostly absence of ‘l’amie’ to a suddenly deceased blonde female schoolmate, worshipped by the surviving teenagers as a glamorous, mythical goddess (QRA, 100) – a sort of collective ‘dead mother’ – but ultimately buried in a figuratively blank grave, the loss never truly felt by anybody at an emotional level, to the point that ‘le jeune Z s’étonnait que le mystère de la mort suscitât si peu de questions et d’angoisse’ (QRA, 101).

Ultimately, young Z’s need to master and conceal his own emotions turns him into a robotic character, unable to respond either to personal sadness or ‘les misères du monde’, which increasingly appear to him
'sous les nuances douces d'une vague irréalité' (QRA, 72). While his ever-growing sensations of affective blankness heighten a sense of existence as grey and meaningless, they also seem to sharpen (in accordance with Green’s clinical diagnosis) his capacities for psychological and linguistic analysis. Young Z finds that he is a brilliant, almost magical seer of other people’s hypocrisy, body language and generally disavowed behaviour (QRA, 68). Increasingly marginalized for his witch-like talents – ‘on le jugeait bizarre’ (QRA, 94) – young Z is condemned to hover on the wrong side of the simple pleasures of life, as if at the edge of a swimming-pool into which he simply dare not plunge (QRA, 95). By the time of the novel’s closing section, existence appears to have become unmanageable. As if at the heart of one of Baudelaire’s ‘Spleen’ poems, young Z is more and more compelled to withdraw from life itself, prey as he is to an experience of it as nothing more than a ‘vaste ensemble de choses grisâtres et mouvantes’ (QRA, 112). The final pages, in which he runs spontaneously out of school towards an unspeakable future – ‘une vie mystérieuse mais accessible’ (QRA, 113) – take him towards a fantasy that sounds alarmingly like suicide. It is the image of Tante, however – Tante and her ‘bon visage calme, froid et rose’ (QRA, 115), Tante who has been, after all, it would suddenly appear, sufficiently internalized by her nephew for something like a feeling of ‘realness’ to emerge – that stops the young boy in his Romantic, would-be self-annihilating tracks. Like a French Aunt Em calling her Dorothy back from Oz, or old Lillian Gish offering grandmotherly counsel while framed by a black sky of stars in Charles Laughton’s 1955 film Night of the Hunter, this surprising vision of a caring Tante stays with the reader long after the memory of NDiaye’s brilliantly constructed sentences and vertiginously analytical passages have faded. This image of a miraculous aunt contains the sustaining fantasy of a truly good-enough love. It is a fantasy that will appear on many – though far from all – of NDiaye’s blank family horizons.

My Victory is Verbal: Comédie classique (1987)

Quizzed by Bernard Pivot on the literary French television show Apostrophes regarding the conceit – in every sense, perhaps – of her new, one-sentence novel Comédie classique, the nineteen-year-old NDiaye refused to acknowledge that there was anything extraordinary whatsoever about this much-discussed central ‘feature’ of the work.
‘C’était un jeu,’ she stated, staring wide-eyed and somewhat blankly at her middle-aged interlocutor. Claiming that she found it easier to write, in fact, than a more conventional novel, she declared: ‘Je n’ai pas cherché à prouver quoi que ce soit […] Ce n’est pas la chose la plus importante, cette phrase unique’. People should look for other things in the novel, she went on to say: the humanity, for example, the humour. Regarding the perceived practical difficulties of going to bed when one is in the middle of constructing an endless sentence, NDiaye could not be clearer: ‘C’est pas un problème.’ ‘C’est pas un problème?’, repeated Pivot, incredulous. ‘Non.’

The ‘problem’ of the novel’s remarkable existence as a single sentence is fascinating within the wider context of the way in which NDiaye’s protagonists frequently respond to a perceived stigmatizing singularity which they feel is over-emphasized by others and which they must therefore disavow, even as they themselves continually draw attention to that stigmatizing singularity. For this long sentence of 1987 does end up operating as a vaguely stigmatizing weight – Les Éditions de Minuit, lest we forget, turned the book down – which NDiaye bears, indeed underlines, with spectacular courage and confidence, but then claims is utterly irrelevant. A double movement of exaggeration and denial is thus set in place: committing herself to a really rather daring and confrontational representational act, NDiaye simultaneously blanks out that gesture, practically insisting that it has never even taken place. Similarly, the plot itself revolves around an act that is overwhelming in its affective intensity – the first-person narrator’s planned killing of his mother at his sister Judith’s behest – and is at the same time experienced as a total non-event, never registered as serious by the narrator himself, and ultimately consigned to a blank zone of unrealized fantasy. Anticipating the affectless familial revenge-violence of the novel *La Sorcière* (1996) and the play *Papa doit manger* (2003), *Comédie classique* maintains a truly bizarre tension between deadpan banality and disavowed exceptionality.

The narrator’s pathology finds its most dazzling representation precisely in his insistence upon relating the events of the day via a 100-page sentence. For the sentence is highly manipulative: it will not allow the reader to escape – at least, not without some degree of anxiety or guilt – from its endless babble. It resembles the hyperactive monologue of a person with no interest whatsoever in the capacities of his or her interlocutor to absorb what it is that s/he is saying. ‘Don’t abandon me!’ the narrator appears to be saying, without, of course, admitting as much.
'Let me talk at you until you drop from exhaustion!' The hapless reader must do all the work of interpretation or ‘communication’, since the narrator appears not to care whether or not his message is clear, only that it never ends. Like a number of characters in later NDiaye texts – one thinks of Nathalie, the spectral young mother Nadia meets on the train to Toulon in *Mon cœur a l'étroit* (2007), or the garrulous truck driver who fills Fanny with non-stop empty chatter as well as his semen in *En famille* (1990) – the narrator suffers from a severe case of unchecked logorrhea. He appears, moreover, to be incapable of reacting to events that seem to demand a strong reaction: having received the letter from Judith in which she asks him to murder their mother, the narrator merely stuffs it in his pocket, ‘en me promettant vaguement de me pencher tout à l’heure sur la question’ (*CC*, 17). Constantly splitting himself, like young Z, into different parts, each judging, patronizing or ignoring the other, he also manifests marked tendencies towards suicidal depression (*CC*, 20, 110), paranoia (*CC*, 104) and vain transgression (*CC*, 68). Once again, the key challenge for this character is to allow himself fully to feel pain. When he is betrayed by his girlfriend Sophie and friend Fausto, he announces to the reader that he is ‘nullement jaloux, seulement écœuré et las, et attristé de cette pathétique absence de jalousie qui me paraissait témoigner de l’échec définitif et sans grandeur de notre aventure’ (*CC*, 121). Not long into the novel, the narrator presents us with a grotesque and unexpected image: a tooth – or perhaps ‘un éclat d’os’ (*CC*, 30) – lurking in a minor character’s beef casserole. Something similarly hard and potentially damaging is floating beneath the surface of his stylish family melodrama. *Comédie classique* provides us with the beginnings of a glimpse into the deeply unhealthy relational framework from which this narrator’s blankness emerges. Split, in both economic and emotional terms, and struggling to integrate both the father’s recent death and the presence of the mother’s brutish new lover Hubert – an unwelcome stepfather, who will be echoed by the figures of old white liberal Zelner in *Papa doit manger* and young white fascist Rocco in *Autoportrait en vert* – the family is bent on concealing the horrible feelings that are clearly gnawing away at it from the inside. Constantly discussing the sensationalized murder of an old man in the neighbourhood, they deploy this violent news story as a screen on which to project their own disavowed feelings of rage. When violence does break out among them – at one point Hubert slaps Judith in the face – the mother’s reactions are to serve a chocolate mousse (*CC*, 59), to weep briefly (*CC*, 60), and to cheer up (*CC*, 61), while the mysterious Judith broods in her
bedroom. Like so many later NDiayean mothers, this one is hopelessly vague and out of reach. The narrator claims to love her ‘en dépit de tout’, but feels deeply anxious at having failed to bring her a gift when coming to visit for lunch (CC, 40), an occasion on which she barely registers his presence, ‘ne déposant qu’un baiser rapide et mécanique sur ma joue’ (CC, 62). At one point he indulges in a particularly grisly fantasy about ‘jolie Maman’ (CC, 41) being decapitated, her head rolling and tumbling, like a jack or a marble, down the staircase towards her detested fiancé Hubert (CC, 42).

The moments of the story during which the mother appears most in her element are when she is relating the melancholic romances of her bucolic adolescence prior to meeting the children’s father:

[...] Maman qu’avait semblé bouleverser ma brève allusion à l’amour tout d’un coup se jeta sur le canapé avec un long soupir de lassitude ou de regret, saisit entre ses deux mains tremblantes ses joues qu’elle avait rebondies et colorées, fraîches comme celle d’une mignonne enfant et déplora dans un accent de tristesse qui me remua d’avoir laissé à jamais derrière elle, sans pleinement s’en repaître alors, l’heureuse époque où elle s’en allait en compagnie de ses sœurs laver le linge de la maisonnée à la rivière avoisinante [...] (CC, 49)

The memory of what happened to their mother next – the meeting with the handsome, quasi-divine stranger who emerges from the water, ‘seulement couvert d’une serviette nouée sur sa hanche’ (CC, 50) – is clearly engraved on her children’s memories, her tales of youthful desire excited and frustrated long before they were ever thought of having presumably been repeated on many an occasion of their childhood, when they were as much prisoners to their mother’s monologues as we readers now are to the vengeful narrator’s. NDiaye’s portrait of a simultaneously affectless and narcissistic mother, partially grieving for a love-object lost before her children were born, once again duplicates aspects of André Green’s theory of the ‘mère morte’, as does her depiction of the ‘deadened’ dimensions of that mother’s children.

The sister Judith is painted with particular insistence as a disquietingly zombified figure, lurking ‘immobile, sans expression’ (CC, 62) at her bedroom window like a statue, or else sitting in her bedroom, doll-like and surrounded by dolls, ‘une sorte de répulsion contenue, froide, visible dans les précautions offensantes avec lesquelles elle examinait chaque morceau de viande avant de le porter à sa bouche’ (CC, 52). Like so many of NDiaye’s protagonists, Judith seems anorexic
(the narrator writes of her ‘sein maigre’, her ‘corps aride et sans chair’, CC, 59), is certainly depressed, and – as two such conditions might suggest – is divided into opposing ‘feeling’ and ‘unfeeling’ fragments. If some parts of her appear affectless, other parts seem to be seething with intense rage. The narrator, fearful of catching what he considers to be his sister’s madness, describes Judith as ‘irréelle, folle’ (CC, 16), as she giggles hysterically in a ‘ricanement sans fond’ (CC, 22). Her obsessive love for their dead father renders her ‘étrange et imprévisible’ (CC, 36), while her equally obsessive interest in her mother’s sexuality (‘Judith, se représentant cela, frissonnait de honte pour elle’, CC, 80) causes her (like Fanny in En famille) to oscillate between a drive towards anonymous promiscuity and virginal, asexual seclusion. Her ultimate stance of ambivalence is, of course, her plan of matricide, which she conceives, Electra-like, as an act that can only be executed by her brother. When she comes to the latter’s flat towards the end of the novel, to discuss the final details of the matricide, the narrator’s description of his sister’s face captures in unforgettable terms the oddly seductive blank splitting that is taking place within her:

[…] souriant d’un étrange sourire plaqué (mais peut-être me le faisais-je trouver artificiel simplement le rouge vif dont elle avait coloré ses lèvres pour la première fois de sa vie et qui rendait vorace, drôlement, le bas de son visage, en contraste avec la tragique froideur de son regard maintenant posé sur moi avec calme et l’assurance, des fous, des hallucinés altiers, superbes, que je pensais ce qu’elle pensait et désirais ce qu’elle voulait), qu’elle […] (CC, 112)

In the narrator’s evocation of Judith’s disturbing mechanical quality, a robotic dissociation reminiscent of the somnambulists of Dr Caligari, NDiaye once again seems to echo the preoccupations of certain psychotherapeutic analysts, and is here particularly in tune with what Duncan Cartwright (2010) describes as ‘the alive-dead self in borderline states’. This ‘alive-dead self’ may be exemplified by Judith, but it can really be found everywhere in this novel: from the non-reactive narrator to the ‘dead’ mother, from the empty-headed girlfriend Sophie to the hapless cousin Georges, who begins inexplicably to die from the inside after the apparently traumatic non-event of losing his suitcase at Saint-Lazare station, becoming ‘laconique et l’œil vide’ (CC, 103), ‘pareil […] à un cadavre, digne et pâle, dans son suaire’ (CC, 111), and eventually burning to (full-blown) death in an improbable house fire on the novel’s final page.
This final page is as oddly ungenerous in terms of satisfying the reader’s frustrated desires as the entire one-sentence novel has been. The reader has been drawn closer and closer towards the anticipated murder of the mother, but no climax, resolution or catharsis of any kind is actually allowed to take place, and instead it is the unimportant character of Georges who is killed, in an absurd, grotesque aside. The mother carries on living, in all her un grievable, spectral emptiness, while her two adult children (the prototypically inappropriate and ‘disappointing’ brother–sister duo that will be revisited by NDiaye, years later, in the fuller form of Rosie and Lazare Carpe), find that their brief moment of mad, quasi-incestuous, matricidal intimacy simply fizzles out, undiscussed and largely unacknowledged: ‘[…]j’évitai désormais de voir Judith qui après quelques lettres auxquelles je m’abstins de répondre et deux ou trois visites chez moi où je la reçus d’une façon ferme et froide, parut se résigner à l’abandon de son absurde dessein[…]’ (CC, 124) This particular Orpheus and Electra lack the energy to convert their blank depression into violence, but subsequent texts by NDiaye will initiate a descent into physical brutality that seems positively unending.


The narrator of NDiaye’s third published novel, *La Femme changée en bûche*, can certainly not be accused of failing to convert her blank depression into violence. The violence she achieves is far from cathartic, however, and resolves absolutely nothing. Reminiscent of another classical character, Medea – she murders her child, ostensibly in order to punish her unfaithful husband – this narrator is possibly the most psychotically affectless of all NDiaye’s protagonists to date. She relates her tale of infanticide, flight and fantastical metamorphosis in a tone of such icy self-justification, and is so madly fixated on fetishistic details such as her tapping red shoes, that the book is sometimes painful to read. Both the dissociated central character and the increasingly multi-voiced narrative (from which the protagonist is eventually squeezed by more powerful subjectivities) can be viewed as an ambitious attempt on the part of NDiaye to stage the terrifying processes of schizoid personality disintegration. The first of her stories in which the young female protagonist’s perspective will be violently axed halfway through her melodramatic tale, and replaced by the viewpoint of female friends.
and relatives and/or that of a mysterious male figure (this is a pattern that will be repeated in *En famille*, *La Naufragée* and *Rosie Carpe*), the novel appears in this way to ape the narrative trajectory of Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* (1960), perhaps the ultimate Western popular cultural reference point for schizophrenic breakdown.14

This text is a bizarre mixture of styles, tones and genres. On the one hand, it is self-consciously avant-garde writing in the style of NDiaye’s Éditions de Minuit godparents Samuel Beckett and Marguerite Duras; on the other it is tacky, trashy comedy-horror – the early films of John Waters spring irresistibly to mind – about a camp and demented ‘teen queen’ on the rampage. As well as shades of ancient Greek theatre, flashes of Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (1937) are clearly discernible in the Devil’s talking cat Mécistée, while more than one French critic (e.g. Bernstein, 1989) claimed, perhaps a little over-imaginatively, to find elements of ‘le conte africain’. If NDiaye’s first two novels had suggested that she was something special in terms of the stylistic brilliance of her texts coupled with the maturity of her psychological observation, *La Femme changée en bûche* marks a turning point from which there would be no going back: in this novel the full force of NDiaye’s indigestible *strangeness* emerges unabashed. Embracing the possibilities of the fantastic as a means of more thoroughly exploring madness and the split-off personality, the text also goes further than the earlier publications both emotionally and politically, opening up the ideological matrices of gender, sexuality, capitalism and stigma as the terrain on which systematized forms of blankness and splitting must be played out.

If young Z and the narrator of *Comédie classique* suffered quietly from the death, disappearance, inaccessibility or absence of their mother and father, the xylomorphic Woman of *La femme changée en bûche* elevates the problem of traumatic parental disconnection to dizzying heights. Shortly before killing her child, the Woman visits her own living but ghostly parents, and discovers them inexplicably clearing their house of banal objects, loading the old things onto an unknown aunt. Finding them ‘abattus et résignés’, and noting that ‘ils soupirèrent et déjà un oubli flottant les apaise’, she makes a startling confession to the reader: ‘Je me suis dit que je les haïssais sûrement sous ma tendresse filiale’ (*FCB*, 20). This private hatred of her father and mother can be seen to play a function in the way events unfold for the Woman that is every bit as crucial as the intrigue with her husband and child. The increasing lack of solidity she experiences within her innermost being,
which sets in early in the novel and reaches its climax with her metamorphosis into a log, appears clearly linked to the absence of secure parental attachment. It is to the unpromising figures of her best friend Valérie and the Devil that the Woman will turn for replacement parents, and this misguided project of child-orchestrated adoption can be seen, as is the case for subsequent abandoned protagonists, to shape her entire nightmarish trajectory.

The Woman arrives at the Devil’s abode in ‘Kalane’, following her killing of ‘Bébé’, because, she claims, she has nowhere else to go. Having burned her bridges in the real world, she has come to the end of the line, to the radical outside of Being fantasized by young Z, perhaps, when he runs out of school into the streets of Paris in the closing pages of Quant au riche avenir. This arrival at the edges of Hell is heavy with existential despair, tinged at once with the stench of suicide and the dream of an improbable renaissance: similar moments can be found in En famille, when Fanny returns to the grandmother’s house after Tante Colette has warned her never to show her face again – she will be ripped to shreds by the dogs, before rising again as a brighter, whiter version of herself – and in Rosie Carpe, when the heroine, in her own words, ‘au bout du rouleau’ (RC, 195), makes the desperate decision to seek out her abandoning family in Guadeloupe. As is the case with Fanny’s and Rosie’s quasi-suicidal hinge-moments, the Woman’s flight to Kalane is soaked in a specifically infantile fantasy: she is aiming for one last shot at being adequately parented. Throughout her stay in the Devil’s quarters, the Woman appears to be looking for a new mother and father, yet every candidate for the job proves neglectful or abusive, leaving her with the impression of endlessly repeated abandonment, feeling ‘aussi inutile qu’un fétu’ (FCB, 79). ‘Je ne voyais dans les coins que des preuves de la plus grande négligence’, she complains of this fantastical new children’s home, ‘et cependant y avait-il véritablement quelqu’un que j’aurais pu accuser?’ (FCB, 74)

The figure of the Devil himself comes across as the ultimate abandoning father, and it is extremely difficult not to read into his portrait nods to both NDiaye’s own father and her recently ‘adoptive’ father, Jérôme Lindon, director of Les Éditions de Minuit. Like the former, the Devil lives in an exotic, faraway locale with more than a hint of West Africa (Kalane is the name of a town in Senegal). Certain key characteristics – his decaying abode, his cold arrogance, his various supine flunkies – are echoed in later texts (En famille, Autoportrait en vert, Trois femmes puissantes) involving the female protagonist’s
visit to an estranged father specifically coded as African. As for the Devil’s links to Lindon, they are numerous. Painted as a literary scout, the Devil attracts to his quarters a charismatic young man who prides himself on having written the most evil and sickeningly transgressive book imaginable, declaring: ‘[J]e suis certain qu’il me recevra comme un prince’ (*FCB*, 29).15 The narrator finds it galling to discover that while she herself had been welcomed with open arms by the Devil just a couple of years previously, she is now treated with an alarming coolness. As the Devil’s secretary Nisa puts it: ‘[N]ous ne pouvons plus avoir pour toi la même indulgence qu’autrefois lorsque tu étais plus jeune et inexpérimentée, et pleine de charme à cause de cela’ (*FCB*, 41). The parallel between this sudden cessation of ‘indulgence’ and Lindon’s perhaps surprising rejection of NDiaye’s second novel *Comédie classique* after his rapturous pursuit of the teenager’s first manuscript seems flagrant, reinforced by the narrator’s references to the injunction that she should be more genuinely impressive than before, given the fact that previously ‘ma jeunesse […] masquait tout, les minuscules indignités et les gros artifices, et les terribles manifestations d’orgueil’ (*FCB*, 52).

In her long, anguished wait for the Devil to return to her after his initial, cursory greeting (*FCB*, 70–5), the Woman, echoing young Z, resembles the Winnicottian baby waiting for the mother who takes too long to come. As Winnicott notes (2005: 131), if the waiting period is longer than the baby can bear, emotional disinvestment and some form of personality erosion will ensue. NDiaye’s description of the Woman’s changing psychic and physical states mirrors such an erosion. At first she worries about the possibility of starving to death (*FCB*, 72), but later, when food does mysteriously arrive but no caregiver is to be found with it, it is the coldness, solitude (*FCB*, 74) and the lack of emotional nourishment that is experienced as intolerable. ‘Certainement, quand je me réveillerai, il sera là’, (*FCB*, 75), she repeats to herself, before dreaming that she herself is the Devil-father (*FCB*, 75), a fantasy that gives way to an unshakable sense that ‘vraiment je n’étais plus rien, qu’une silhouette transparente’ (*FCB*, 79). Given equally short shrift by the talking cat Mécistée, to whom she has clung like another adoptive parent (*FCB*, 59), and the white-blonde, ghostly secretaries Nisa, Edna and Pesta (‘Comme j’aurais aimé m’asseoir sur les genoux de Pesta!’; *FCB*, 78), the Woman has nowhere to go but into a zone resembling psychotic breakdown.

The second half of the novel (itself split into two separate sections) conveys a state of absolute fragmentation, at every conceivable level: generic, stylistic, grammatical, syntactical, narratological, gendered,
ontological. The Woman’s gradual disappearance from the narrative itself – she is, for a time, completely replaced by a third-person narrator who wishes to relate the bizarre adventures of the Woman’s friend Valérie, Valérie’s other friend Esmée, Esmée’s fiancé Stéphane Ventru, and Stéphane Ventru’s conservative aunt and unnameable pet – seems to be the logical conclusion to her increasingly unmanageable feelings of invisibility. Like Winnicott’s ‘unmirrored’ child, helplessly losing her core sense of self through insufficient attention and empathy on the part of her caregivers, the Woman cannot experience herself as real, alive, or fully human; even the faint consciousness that remains is shoved aside (without even so much as a full stop’s warning) by the increasingly powerful new narrator:

Pourquoi mon cœur ne battait-il pas à me crever la poitrine? Ah, déjà le bois l’avait atteint
Très bien, très bien, songeait la bête. C’était un miracle qu’elle pût songer, étant une pure abstraction. Malheureux Ventru dans ses habits volés!
Tous quatre sont passés sans me jeter un coup d’œil. J’ai tenté d’appeler Valérie mais c’était trop tard. Ma langue ne remuait plus, figée dans le sapin. Je me suis levée, j’ai ramassé ma valise et aussi vite que me l’ont permis mes genoux raidis je me suis dirigée vers la rivière
Très bon, très bon, songeait la bête satisfaite. (FCB, 98)

Once the Woman is silenced entirely (having become a full-blown log, she has neither voice nor consciousness) the new narrator is free to concentrate entirely on Valérie and the others, which s/he does in a relatively lucid if whimsical manner. By the final section, however, when the Woman, back to human form, re-enters the narrative, the reader faces an utterly schizophrenic text, lurching from first to third person, between various different perspectives (mainly the Woman, Esmée and Stéphane Ventru, although the shifts are not always clear). A total and seemingly uncontrolled disintegration of subjectivity has taken place, and the groaning, twittering, multi-voiced text resembles a body in the throes of diabolical possession.

This final wholesale psychic splitting is, of course, in many ways the logical conclusion of a narrative which had only ever given a superficial imitation of unity and coherence. The Woman was, from the outset, split at an emotional level, long before her stint in Kalane. Governed by terrifying principles of pride, rage and perceived humiliation, these sensations sometimes appearing to pull against each other, at other times seeming to operate in concert, she veers insanely between unmanageable
affect and total affectlessness. ‘J’avais le sentiment très vif de nous avoir contraints mon mari et moi à redevenir moraux et d’avoir accompli un acte d’une très grande moralité’ (FCB, 24) she announces, before remarking on the satisfying sound of her heels clacking on the stairs. She is directed in her behaviour not by the Devil but, one might argue psychoanalytically, by a worldly (if ferocious) superego, whose despotic sense of ‘duty’ simultaneously stirs up uncontrollably vengeful ‘feelings’ in its subject and stifes all her capacity actually to feel. Shortly before placing Bébé in the diabolical outfit that will burn him to death, she kisses the infant ‘avec un sentiment de grande tendresse qui me remuait tout l’intérieur’ (FCB, 22), exclaiming to herself apropos the clothing material: ‘C’est une bien jolie petite toilette, car le tissu était fin et la broderie délicate’ (FCB, 23). Unable to grasp the reality of her child as a living, human entity, before murdering him she ‘blanks’ him, in every sense: ‘l’enfant […] ne pesait guere, tout en blanc’ (FCB, 17). Once he is dead, she consigns him to barely representable oblivion: ‘l’image de Bébé s’est atténuée, ses traits sont devenus flous’ (FCB, 35). The Woman is ‘hard’ long before her fantastical transformation into a log (and later a pebble), and her narrative is fragmented long before it is ripped to shreds by the spectral voices of others. Having modelled herself on the cosmically unfeeling magazine heroine ‘Lili Stark’, a character ‘au regard hardi’ (FCB, 13), who leaps over obstacles ‘comme une petite chèvre sans cervelle’ (FCB, 13), this narrator has never been, not even at the best of times – and to quote Psycho’s Norman Bates – ‘quite herself’.

La Femme changée en bûche, the first of NDiaye’s ‘fantastical’ fictions, is also, in a seeming paradox, the first of her texts to begin the long and fascinating process of providing a ‘real’ socio-political framework for its protagonist’s various emotional and ontological disorders. It achieves this contextualization via shadowy allusions to a highly recognizable system founded on the twin ideologies of capitalist alienation and stigmatizing marginalization. The Woman’s increasingly uncontrollable paranoia, splitting, blankness and disintegration are not only explicable within the largely psychoanalytic terms of parental withdrawal and abandonment that I have been deploying. She exists within a sharply drawn world of economic inequality and obsessive hierarchization, of obsessively gendered standards of beauty and sexual acceptability, and traumatic modes of essentializing perception, in which certain bodies and associations are, for unspecified reasons, deemed to be irremediably tainted, incapable of integration, and accordingly deserving of extermination.
It remains unclear throughout the novel exactly what undesirable quality prevents the narrator from earning the full respect of the Devil’s secretaries, of the Devil himself or, in the outside world, of her husband and Valérie. The woman tells us of a ‘dégoût inconscient’ (FCB, 17) felt by her faithless spouse towards her: she has been ‘traînée dans la boue’ (FCB, 10), changed forever, on account of some humiliating act that she has performed with the Devil, in the narrative’s prehistory, in order to save her husband. The tainting of her body and her very being carries the distinct whiff of sexualized abuse, rape or enforced prostitution (all practices that will be explored in greater depth in subsequent novels and plays by NDiaye), a ‘vibe’ that is lent added weight by both the narrator’s vague references to ‘la honte’ of ‘la chose faite’ (FCB, 52) and the invasive pawing she receives at the hands of the Devil’s aroused secretary Pesta (FCB, 52–7). The sense of herself as fundamentally and irreversibly spoiled to such a degree that she is a new and worthless breed of person makes the Woman’s underlying psychological problems even more pronounced, as neglect-related trauma is combined with a very peculiar and apparently unspeakable stigma. Her preoccupation with becoming somebody else, somebody who is ‘véritablement une fille de vingt ans’ (FCB, 132) propels her towards an obsessive identification with the glamorous and yet ‘ordinary’ Valérie, Valérie, whose glorious normality is longingly evoked in the novel’s rapturous closing words: ‘[E]t Valérie est ordinaire, mais son goût de l’existence la transfigure’ (FCB, 157). This identification is, of course, also doomed to failure: the Woman will never be ‘ordinaire’, and will be doomed to live out her days as the Devil’s fourth secretary.

The Woman’s unnameable stigma finds a bizarre parallel in the abjection of Stéphane Ventru, the wimpish ‘replacement hero’ of the novel’s second half. Ventru’s attachment to a queer and hated pet – an animal that simultaneously resembles a dog, a monkey and a bird – causes him to be both ostracized and derided (FCB, 93). Like a shamefully private part of himself (his aunt considers that it is ‘une monstruosité issue de lui-même, dont il était responsable, une absurdité créée tout exprès pour fuir certaines obligations’, FCB, 92), the pet carries an almost racialized psychic weight. Considered to be Ventru’s exotically tainted, hybrid offspring, it is nevertheless a ‘child’ that cannot be considered a proper child and which, like the unspeakably embarrassing ‘sub-children’ of later NDiaye texts (Fanny in En famille, Steve in La Sorcière, Titi in Rosie Carpe, Jacky in Les Serpents) must
be sacrificed (FCB, 150–1) in order for the systems of family and community to progress unimpeded by unwelcome ‘difference’.

The novel’s systems of blank conformity and obedience – exemplified by the zombiflying call centre where Valérie revels in her role of manager – produce desires and relationships in which all semblance of love, spontaneity and aliveness is crushed. The sexual relationship between Valérie’s friends and call centre minions, Esmée and Ventru, becomes characterized by addictive and dehumanizing behaviour. Ventru’s reality as an emotional being is increasingly ignored by Esmée in favour of the series of muscular men with whom she finds she must pursue a blankly compulsive sex addiction (FCB, 100). Both his pain (‘il pleurait et geignait mais il ne l’entendait pas’, FCB, 103) and his own increasingly uncategorizable sexuality (‘Patin au cou de sanglier […] d’une certain façon ne déplut pas à Ventru’, FCB, 112) are disavowed, as characters and narrator(s) alike speed towards a violent and farcical ‘resolution’ in marriage. By the time of their wedding, Esmée and Ventru have been worn down by ‘l’indéfinissable hargne que nous avions l’un pour l’autre et qui pour chacun réduisait l’autre à une pâle, mornie silhouette haïssable, un haïssable et incompréhensible silhouette de lui-même’ (FCB, 144) and have thus become as dematerialized and ‘unreal’ as the Woman, through an adherence to modes of behaviour just as alienating, NDiaye seems to suggest, as a brief stay in Hell. (Kalane is where they head for the wedding, in fact, as it is, coincidentally, Ventru’s aunt’s main place of residence.)

The seeming impossibility of inscribing living love within relationships, be they parental, spousal or collegial, dogs all the characters of La Femme changée en bûche. This failure causes the characters to disintegrate from within, as their perceptions of themselves and each other fade to blank nothingness. The one character who appears occasionally to have some capacity for experiencing a strong emotion that resembles real love is Stéphane Ventru, who, like young Z, finds that his feelings for his aunt are overwhelming in both their intensity and their ambivalence:

En face de Tante, l’émotion me serrait la gorge, mêlée à de la peur et de la pitié, mais le sentiment dominant demeurait, peut-être de ce que je ne savais assez lui manifester ma tendresse pour la persuader, malgré ma désinvolture, malgré mon indifférence, qu’elle était aimée, et le plus important n’était pas de l’aimer mais qu’elle n’en doute jamais. (FCB, 130)

Fantasizing about touching his aunt’s future dead body (FCB, 130) and her present living one (FCB, 141), Ventru describes a remarkable inner
The conflict between emotion he experiences as ‘vaguement obscène’ (FCB, 141) and the ultimately stronger desire to display a public attitude of coldness, dignity and control: ‘Je tâchai de plaquer sur mes traits une expression bourrue, qu’elle me croie fatigué, ne m’adresse pas la parole ou, mieux, s’imagine que sa présence m’ennuyait’ (FCB, 142). Ventru’s flight away from his ‘true self’ towards an icy mask of blank indifference is predicated on his sense of his complex love as unacceptable. This unshakable sense of disgust at their true feelings will lead NDiaye’s protagonists into more and more dangerous forms of falseness, into situations of such remarkable self-betrayal that the Woman’s transformation into a log after her brief stay with the Devil will begin to seem almost light-hearted.

My Mother/My Aunt/My Self: En famille (1990)

*En famille* is NDiaye’s first indisputable masterpiece. Stylistically and structurally indebted to Cervantes and Kafka, Fanny’s circular quest for the mythical Tante Léda self-consciously resembles the peregrinations of both Quixote and K. The novel is nevertheless startlingly original, blending its dizzying analysis of ‘private madness’ (cf. Green 1996) with a critique of collective derangement that is at times unbelievable in its stark ferocity. NDiaye takes young Z’s stench of isolation as far as it can go, to death and beyond, filtering it through an omnipresent (racialized) shame. If this kind of shame was kept hidden in NDiaye’s first three novels, *En famille* will turn the process of ‘race’’s erasure into its central theme and stylistic conceit. As Lydie Moudileno puts it:

> Marie Ndiaye refuse le mode de l’autobiographie ou du récit ‘victimisant(e)’, qui, de son propre aveu ne justifierait qu’une demi-page. Elle s’engage plutôt dans une déconstruction minutieuse des mécanismes de l’anathème: ‘C’est peut-être, justement, qu’il n’y a rien’, répond-elle lorsqu’on lui demande, de quoi, finalement, elle se plaint. Il s’agit donc d’un personnage qui a l’intention paradoxale non de raconter, mais d’élucider ‘tout le malheur’ provenant de sa naissance ratée, tout en affirmant qu’il consiste en ‘rien’. Ou, plus justement, en rien d’autre qu’en une absence. L’absence de thème. L’anathème inracontable, oublié. (Moudileno, 1998: 446)

*En famille* is one of the most complex texts ever to have been written about the subject’s ‘soul murder’ through racialization. It is comparable, in terms of the profundity of its insight, to the greatest American novels...
on the subject – Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1953) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are texts that spring immediately to mind – but wraps the question within a cover so self-effacing that the end result is a text as chimeric as its hybrid protagonist. The novel is, in many ways, the ultimate schizoid response to an indigestible experience of racism. On the one hand, it refracts all human experience through the variable of ‘race’; on the other hand, it keeps uncannily silent about the topic, blanking it out entirely.17

A paradoxical act of (non-) communication is set in place. The reader is, at one level, invited to interpret a series of seemingly unmistakeable clues as to the racialized nature of Fanny’s putative difference. As critics such as Ambroise K. Teko-Agbo (1995), Michael Sheringham (2007) and Clarissa Behar (2013) have pointed out, the ‘difference’ is grounded in corporeal and physiognomic particularities (albeit euphemistically designated) inherited from the father, who dwells in a hot part of the world. Moreover, Fanny’s paternally derived difference is shared by characters who work in the capital’s fast-food restaurant, live in the *banlieue*, possess outlandish names, are marginalized in ways connected to poverty and the display of poor taste (e.g. sportswear), and are confused with one another by the likes of Tante Colette who, speaking of young Georges, exclaims to Fanny: ‘Si tu ne m’avais pas dit de qui il s’agit […] j’aurais cru que c’était toi!’ (*EF*, 117). Despite the presence of these clues, however, the novel is frequently read – especially in France – as if it had nothing whatsoever to do with ‘race’, indeed, as if even to suggest such a thing were to indulge in the most appallingly ‘racist’ over-interpretation. It may be that in order to read the relevant clues one must already have some insight into the workings of racialized discrimination. Without this kind of consciousness, the reader may be doomed to scrutinize the evidence in vain, seeing in it nothing but the signs of ‘universal’ alienation. In the manner of the buffoonish Eugène (‘Vraiment, je ne vois pas, ne cessait de dire Eugène en gonflant les joues’, *EF*, 30), the embarrassed village shopkeeper (‘l’aimable commerçante […] préférerait ne pas la voir’, *EF*, 161) or, indeed, Fanny herself (‘Fanny feignit de ne pas comprendre’, *EF*, 161; ‘Fanny, honteuse, feignit de ne plus le voir, dans la crainte qu’on pût supposer entre eux quelque relation’, *EF*, 144), this kind of happily ignorant reader stares only into a blank and mystifying nothingness.18

The act of feigned ignorance is inescapable in an experience of reading *En famille*. It is inscribed within the psychologies of the main characters, but also reproduces itself within the cultural context of the novel’s reception by readers.
The ancient Greek term for feigned ignorance is εἰρωνεία or eirōneía, a word that gives us the English ‘irony’. Not only is irony to be found in the pretence of not knowing, it is incarnated in the quasi-psychotic – distinctly Sadeian – insensitivity of the narrator. This narrator’s icy humour when describing one of Fanny’s numerous assaults or humiliations is sometimes so cruel that the reader winces, even as s/he giggles with disbelief, torn in two opposing directions, just as Fanny herself is. Whether she is being pelted by her aunt with rotten plums, raped by her uncle in the back of his car, or ripped to shreds by her cousin’s dog, Fanny is never treated with kindness by the Janus-faced narrator, but is instead exposed to a spectral mockery which arises from the manner in which the events are reported. ‘Si tu parles à ma tante’, says Fanny to her uncle after he has screwed her, ‘précise bien que pour te suivre j’ai abandonné mon service’ (EF, 110). She emerges from the episode with her aunt-fixation comically intact, her pathology rather than her uncle’s wickedness becoming the focus of the narration’s languid amusement. As for the moment of her dismemberment, the images – even the punctuation – employed to relate it are oddly jocular: ‘Fanny n’avait fait entendre qu’un léger, très léger couinement! Maintenant [le chien] fouissait le poitrail, à la recherche du cœur’ (EF, 186). The drooling Fanny is laughed at even in death, then, and this death is taken even less seriously by a narrative that resurrects the victim in rosy new form a few chapters later.

And yet the reader winces at the unfairness of what Fanny must go through. The narrator seems keen to acknowledge the emotional reality of Fanny’s suffering even as she undermines it in her grotesque use of laconic humour or grating melodrama. When Fanny shrieks that ‘mes parents m’ont fait tant de mal que je respirerai quand ils mourront!’ (EF, 22), she sounds both ridiculous and affected – and yet her complaints are more than justified: she has been treated abominably by these people. NDiaye’s narrative creates a truly weird dimension of emotion and non-emotion, of kindness and cruelty, in which the unhappiness of a character for whom we have developed genuine feelings of empathy both ‘counts’ and is dismissed in the same sentence. These simultaneously pathetic and humorous enunciations double back on themselves in a continuous movement of paradox. Like Fanny, the narrator is caught between warm feeling and cold contempt. ‘Elle était mensonge des pieds à la tête, conçue ainsi!’ (EF, 29), thinks Fanny to herself about
herself, and it is this spirit of violent self-critique that the text duplicates. Sadistic irony is sewn into its fibre. If Fanny ends up stripped of human skin, a hovering, gaseous ghoul, she has already much earlier been lowered to the position of something less than human, an operation initiated by her family and her community, in which she is complicit, and in which the narrator ‘ironically’ participates. Ambivalence is inscribed in the split-off style of narration, both executioner and victim of the very violence it describes. In NDiaye’s creation of a cruel narrative that nevertheless identifies with its victim’s sufferings, we find a prime example of what Agamben calls ‘the masochistic strategy and its almost sarcastic profundity’ (1999: 108).

However we may choose to make sense of it, En famille is a strangely human and inhuman text, its ‘feelings’ more raw and on display than those of almost any other contemporary French novel, and yet at the same time hard, metallic, cruel. If all the characters in En famille resemble automatons – their robotic function often underlined by hilariously theatrical tapping feet (EF, 85), trembling knees (EF, 141) and folded arms (EF, 159) – no figure so fully tips into a caricature of the non-human as Fanny’s mother. En famille is the first of NDiaye’s texts to explore the way in which a mother’s failure to be truly ‘alive’ in her dealings with her child can, in many ways, be found at the root of much of the zombified sensibility dominating the plot, the characterization and even the grammar of the text. Fanny’s mother, accepted back into the family fold once her racialized transgression with Fanny’s father is over, seems unable, for most of the novel, to see, hear or feel her still stigmatized daughter’s presence. It is as if she has had some crucial faculty of perception cut out of her, but only in her dealings with her problematic offspring:

Car pas la moindre émotion n’altérait le doux visage de la mère de Fanny et ses yeux pâles avaient rencontré l’œil sombre de Fanny comme celui d’une inconnue, avec l’affable détachement qu’elle avait cultivé au salon de coiffure. Dans son trouble, Fanny trébucha, manqua tomber. (EF, 169)

Even when she is surreptitiously feeding Fanny during the latter’s period of hiding under the family staircase, it is impossible for anyone – reader, Fanny, perhaps even mother herself – to know what is going on in her heart or her head.

Il semblait qu’elle agit négligemment, dans le vague souvenir d’un devoir plutôt que par miséricorde. Se rappelait-elle seulement ce qu’elle eût trouvé dans la niche si elle avait soulevé le rideau, rien n’était moins sûr,
à voir combien distraite et lointaine elle traversait le couloir sur ses jolies mules dorées, arrêtée de temps en temps, par hasard, devant le réduit sans que sa cheville tremblât, sans que par un petit battement du pied elle fit connaître à sa fille une pensée à son sujet, un regret. (EF, 182)

If Fanny has difficulty in experiencing herself as a living, sentient, human being, and if this difficulty in registering Fanny’s humanity is to a large extent shared by the narrator, Fanny’s mother completes the deadening collaboration. Indeed, the only occasions on which Fanny’s mother does betray any emotion whatsoever are when she is roused to anger by Fanny’s refusal to stay dead: ‘Que n’es-tu demeurée morte! Le problème qu’il y avait à ne plus vivre, en regard de ton état présent, j’aimerais que tu me l’expliques’ (EF, 224). Beyond all qualifications such as good or evil, Fanny’s mother is the ultimate maternal blank. When disowning her daughter, she erases the very appellation of maternity, signing the letter merely ‘la deuxième sœur de Tante Colette’ (EF, 225).

The mythical aunt Léda is, of course, the adult Fanny’s new love-object, and she is linked to the dream of a different kind of integration. In Léda, Fanny believes she will find a saviour, a protector, a truly good enough new mother. Léda is, in a way, even more alluring than the panoply of blank mother substitutes to whom Fanny clings in the hope that their impossible love will grant her acceptance – and whose hard, pink queen is Tante Colette. Léda is desirable in a more poignant manner, since she is the one fantasy parent who promises to resemble the isolated Fanny, her long-ago banishment constituting the very essence of her identity, as far as Fanny is concerned. In this desire to be adopted by a new relative who is just as exotically marginalized as she is, we find the seeds of a recurring NDiaye family romance, that of the imaginary dark mother. The ‘dark mother’ fantasy rivals the ‘dead mother’ complex that afflicts Fanny and so many of NDiaye’s protagonists, a complex that causes them to repeat the experience of rejection from their zombified (white) mother in a whole host of unfeeling (white) love-objects. Both the ‘dark mother’ fantasy and the ‘dead mother’ complex jostle for supremacy within the same subject (we will see a similar battle taking place within both Lucie in La Sorcière and Nadia in Mon cœur à l’étroit), but the former is inevitably beaten into second place by always remaining so resolutely in the realms of unrealisable fantasy. Tante Léda (like the fleeting, yellow-robed woman of La Sorcière and the improbable, long-lost mama of Mon cœur à l’étroit) never acquires the sharp contours of Tante Colette, of Lucie’s nasty friend Isabelle, or of
Nadia’s patronizing travel companion Nathalie. At one point early in En famille, Fanny asks a man who claims to have lain eyes on her aunt Léda’s breast, what this mythical breast looked like: ‘L’homme ne réussit à le décrier, manquant de vocabulaire. Alors, ses mains levées caressaient une forme invisible’ (EF, 56). Léda, the dark fantasy breast, is yet another blank, then, as are all the ‘representations’ of Leda that are subsequently offered up for tantalizing consumption.22

En famille is thus buried beneath an accumulation of absences. Not only is the reason for Fanny’s exclusion erased, but so is the textual presence of pity, empathy and emotion. All the characters are reduced to the less than human embodiments of so many doll parts, none more than the figure standing for ‘original’ relationality, that of the mother, who emerges as a horrifying zombie. Figures to whom Fanny turns to replace the ‘dead mother’ are either livid, hard and rejecting (Tante Colette, Lucette, Tante Clémence) or else fantastical (Tante Léda). As for the moribund languor of all the various secondary characters, this seems to grow rather than diminish as the narrative advances. Already hopelessly passive in the flashbacks to her youth (she comes across during the excommunication of her loyal sister Léda as the most miserable of saps), by the end of the novel, Fanny’s mother sinks to the position of a depressed and helpless child. Cousin Eugène, always characterized by his emptiness, dwells, in the novel’s final pages, in a wardrobe from which he is too listless to emerge. Fanny’s father is as distracted by the television when he first appears (EF, 37) as he is when incestuously seeking his ‘improved’ daughter’s hand in marriage (EF, 244).

And yet, as we have seen, Fanny, psychically and physically indescribable though she may often be, does, on occasion, truly feel. She may well be the novel’s only character with the capacity for feeling. But her flashes of intense feeling are constantly diverted into self-annihilating and unfeeling modes of behaviour. Rather than using her keen intelligence as a means of gaining true emotional or politicized insight into her situation, for example, she instead deploys it in the service of quasi-psychotic, pseudo-philosophical inquiry:

Seulement, quelques questions me viennent: personne ne me l’ayant ordonné, est-ce que je ne me suis pas trompée en décidant de partir à la recherche de Léda? Car est-ce qu’il n’était pas prévu que mes parents négligent d’inviter Léda, autrefois? Est-ce qu’il n’était pas plutôt dans l’ordre véritable que Léda soit tenue à l’écart de cette histoire familiale? Même, ne pourrait-ce pas être pour mon bien, personne ne le soupçonnant, et chacun agissant pourtant comme il le doit, que Léda fût
absente? Et ne suis-je pas en train de troubler ce qui m’est cher par-dessus tout, le bel ordre établi, les traditions, en croyant qu’on y a manqué? Vois-tu, toutes ces questions me trottent par la tête. (EF, 45)

Just as her initially promising capacities for thought are, in the final analysis, numbed through excessive instrumentalization, so is Fanny’s sexuality blanked out through overuse. Offering her body to others for the sole purpose of integration, Fanny is unable either to take real pleasure in her sex and physical beauty or to use them in the relational creation of love. Her frenzied desire for her cousin Eugène is all about wanting to ingest him and what his body symbolizes, to feed off his proximity to the family and its unnameable whiteness:

Comme elle l’aimait! songeait-elle éblouie. Il lui semblait embrasser la vaste chair de Tante Colette, et le froid squelette de l’aïeule, même la carcasse des vieux chiens râpeux! Comme elle les aimait tous! Un coup violent dans le dos la fit suffoquer. Eugène, ayant dégagé ses poings, la frappait furieusement. Elle durcit la mâchoire, se frotta à lui jusqu’à ce qu’elle eût mal. (EF, 63)

On other occasions, Fanny’s desire for Eugène is indistinguishable from a desire to be Eugène: ‘Comme elle eût voulu, se blottissant contre lui, devenir Eugène lui-même’ (EF, 65). In the same way, her ‘friendship’ for Lucette (yet another fundamentally depressed love-object) arises with ardour from the desire to be associated with qualities she associates with the family. The chance of such an association leads her to act, literally, like a dog, as she puts her chin on Lucette’s knee (EF, 74), looks up to her as if she were a goddess (EF, 75), and throws herself, snapping furiously, at the man she thinks is attacking her mistress (EF, 106). All Fanny’s sexual encounters are motivated by the belief that they will bring her closer to the whiteness that others refuse to believe she has a right to enjoy. Whether she is being mounted by a boy from the village or her uncle Georges, Fanny sees in every coupling a chance for integration. But Fanny’s psyche during these racialized attempts at acceptance through sex enters an alarming disintegration. When she is with the lorry driver, his features pleasingly embodying the ‘larges faces pourprées de la région’ (EF, 119), fragments of blankness, buried memory and abuse come together in an awful maelstrom:

Les traits de l’homme s’estompaient et, quand il se redressa et lâcha enfin Fanny, elle ne distinguait plus qui il était véritablement, de nombreux visage se mêlant dans sa mémoire, s’ingéniant à l’abuser. Pour ne pas risquer que sortit de sa bouche le nom de l’oncle Georges ou de son
propre père elle se tut. L’homme, content, dissertait. (EF, 120)

Fanny’s one true opportunity for growth and transcendence of her family-orientated obsession arrives towards the end of the novel, in the form of her chance to become a good mother figure to the little girl who ends up serving as her messenger, and who is treated by the family as a punishable projection of Fanny, just as Fanny was, when younger, a punishable projection of Léda. Fanny’s failure to protect the child from the family’s abuse, despite the fact that this child would, it seems, do anything to make Fanny happy, signals the novel’s inability to carry on existing, for it, like Fanny, gives up the ghost shortly thereafter. The description of the child-messenger’s shame at her own maltreatment by the family and, even more alarmingly, her inability to conceive of herself and of her own injuries as real (EF, 279) sets up a third generation of blank suffering, taking the narrative into a zone of intolerable pain. For Fanny has not only transmitted her own form of self-annihilating psychosis to her little ward, but has also become complicit in the destruction of a child she should be protecting. Even when the girl has lost chunks out of her arm (EF, 281), Fanny chooses not to acknowledge the extent of the danger in which she is putting her, preferring instead to dwell in the old, reliable space of blankness so beloved by her own mother: that space which will permit her, in her turn, not to see, nor to feel, nor to intervene.

Suicide is Painless: *Un temps de saison* (1994)

Over three years passed before the publication of NDiaye’s follow-up novel to *En famille*. NDiaye was busy during those years building her own family, giving birth (in 1991 and 1993) to a girl and a boy (a second son would follow in 1997). It is perhaps fitting, then, that in the relatively brief and pithy *Un temps de saison* – less than half the size of the epic *En famille* – NDiaye explores the situation of the nebulous outsider who, unlike Fanny, does manage, in a way, to ‘settle down’. But if Herman, the maths teacher protagonist, can be said to achieve something like successful and potentially lasting integration in the village where he ends up after the mysterious disappearance of his wife and child, it is an integration on unknown, unfair and unstable terms. Herman’s decision to stay in the village and ‘faire son trou’ (UTS, 119) will necessitate the inexorable death of whatever personality he
can be said to have possessed in the first place. Unlike Fanny, Herman is willing to stop struggling like a dying fish on the end of a hook, to give in and simply to go with whatever flow is strongest.\textsuperscript{21} He is also able, crucially, to ‘pass’ in ways that are seemingly closed off for Fanny, despite her best intentions. But Herman’s reward for semi-successful integration is far from enviable. Protagonists such as Fanny and the Woman wanted nothing more than to take refuge in hospitable cottages of blankness (Kalane, the grandmother’s house), where they fantasized vainly about being accepted by and interacted with by the houses’ various inaccessible denizens.\textsuperscript{24} Herman’s provisional acceptance by Charlotte, Mélïnde, Gilbert and Lemaître and the other villagers, however, leads him towards a different kind of soul death. He may not be transformed into a log and he may not fade into a shadow-ghoul, but his growing feelings of dissolution, iciness and bodily liquefaction convey, in a by now recognizably ‘NDiayean’ mode of the fantastic, the sense of a slow, resigned disintegration: a suicide by numbers. Unable to capitalize on the various flattering hints thrown his way that suggest that he might, if he wanted, one day rise to the dizzy heights of Alfred and the mayor – themselves originally outsiders – he will simply fall apart, at first rotting from the inside (‘tout l’intérieur de son être lui semblait humide et mortifié, contracté, en voie de pourrissement’, \textit{UTS}, 50), while by the final pages he appears to be actually melting: ‘Vous êtes fondu, littéralement fondu!’ (\textit{UTS}, 135) exclaims his horrified father-in-law.

One of the main reasons for Herman’s rapid descent into dissolution appears to be a self-annihilating tendency he shares with the narrator of \textit{La Femme changée en bûche}. Both protagonists take a certain comfort in the experience of losing control, of moving closer and closer towards a state resembling vegetation. The Woman reports a veritable pleasure in the sensation, or rather non-sensation, of becoming wooden, no longer subject to the vicissitudes of feeling. ‘Comme il faisait bon être bûche!’ (\textit{FCB}, 154), she nostalgically recalls in the novel’s closing pages. While the log-state can be seen as mimetic of the end of life, the expression of a certain kind of existential failure (‘Quant à moi, je voulais bien échouer’, \textit{FCB}, 12), it also seems to have the potential for catalysing a radical form of insight. As the Woman notes, it was only as a log that she was able to have the quasi-Buddhic realization that ‘tous les états se valent’ (\textit{FCB}, 136). As we will later see in the case of the fantastically wounded and immobilized Ange in \textit{Mon cœur à l’étroit} (2007), the unexpected descent into unthinkable passivity can be experienced as the
necessary regressive prelude to ethico-spiritual renaissance. In Herman’s case, however, the letting go does not appear to promise rebirth of any kind. His will to fail, to be numb and soft like the alluringly languid Charlotte, floating amidst a ‘déchéance paresseuse’ (UTS, 93), ‘somnolant par oisiveté’ (UTS, 92), brings him deeper and deeper into a depression that seems to have no possibility of end.

Indifference and a blank addiction to habit set in at the start of the second half of the novel, as the narrator slides, in apparent sympathy with Herman, into a relentless use of the imperfect tense. Flaubertian descriptions of inexorable, deadened sinking begin to proliferate:

Il gagnait sa propre chambre, jetait un œil par la vitre.
[...
Il sommeillait un peu, par désœuvrement.
[...
Il tournait toute la journée dans l’hôtel, montait et descendait sans but, tentait d’accoster Charlotte, passait du temps à se cacher de Gilbert et de la mère. (UTS, 84–5)

It is in this third image of an aimless and fearful – but increasingly horny – Herman, prowling the staircases in search of an encounter with Charlotte, that the novel’s most original theme emerges: in Un temps de saison, ‘blankness’ begins to take on a specifically sexualized hue. This is a novel that is ultimately focused on the depressive allure of promiscuity and prostitution in the wake of the ‘original’ familial abandonment or disappearance which we have now come to expect in NDiaye’s texts. Alfred, the president of the ‘comité des fêtes’, establishes the blueprint for Herman’s slide into vaguely sleazy torpor. Himself abandoned in the village by his wife many years previously, when she disappeared in exactly the same manner as Herman’s wife and child (UTS, 96–9), the man he has become is fully ‘integrated’ – a status that is embodied by his dyed platinum-blond hair – and equally fully immersed in the pleasures of an unrestrained, multi-directional and resolutely unemotional lasciviousness. Unable to refrain from groping Herman (‘Il posa sa main sur le genou de Herman et le serra un peu fort […] Il le touchait fréquemment, du coude, du pied, comme sans y penser, et bientôt Herman n’y fit plus attention’, UTS, 61), exactly as the secretary Pesta absent-mindedly paws the Woman in Kalane, Alfred is a staunch advocate (and connoisseur) of the village’s systems of prostitution, recommending Charlotte’s services (she is rented out, in the manner of the second Rose-Marie Carpe, by her mother) to Herman at
every available opportunity. Meanwhile, Gilbert’s vassal-like status with regard to the powerful Lemaitre has a strongly sexualized underlying dimension, the famous doubles tennis match at L. of which he speaks obsessively to Herman beginning, towards the novel’s denouement, to take on the colours of a nightmarish orgy.

Herman ‘loses’ his wife Rose in much the same manner as Alfred allegedly lost his. Judging from the mayor’s bizarre account of these kinds of unexplained cases of abandonment, the disappearing spouse – seeming, interestingly, always to be a woman – is afflicted by both a mysterious kind of ‘répugnance’ (UTS, 99) for their old life, a feeling which culminates in sudden withdrawal from their partner, and a quasi-suicidal breakdown: ‘Sa détresse à ce moment-là, pensait le maire, devait être immense’ (UTS, 98). It is difficult not to see in Herman’s abandonment by Rose – who will, of course, return only in ghostly, dematerialized, utterly unresponsive form – yet another reworking of André Green’s ‘mère morte’, with Herman as an infantile boy–man (he spends a large part of the novel sliding around in socks), suddenly deprived of his maternal wife when she can no longer provide him with the love on which he has unthinkingly depended. Unable to grieve her disappearance properly – his is precisely the ‘blank’ non-mourning recommended by Alfred (UTS, 107) – he will devote a suddenly hyper-eroticized non-energy to capturing the attention of two alternative wife–mother figures, Charlotte and Métilde. Even though the former is overtly sluggish, while the latter is ambitious and driven, the two women are equally unreachable at an emotional level, and exude a resolutely deadened air: Métilde’s endless chatter about the need for the lackadaisical Charlotte to wake up and further her career (UTS, 77–8) feels just as disconnected as Valérie’s appalling ‘corporate-speak’ in La Femme changée en bûche. And yet the infantilized Herman, bereft of family and in need of any attachment he can come by, clings in terror to these indifferent new potential caregivers: ‘Il sentait du reste qu’il se devait d’afficher, pour le moment en tout cas, une complète allégeance à qui voulait bien s’occuper de lui […] Car elle va m’aider, se répéta-t-il machinalement’ (UTS, 47, 53)

Charlotte is a bewilderingly vacant character, something like a cross between Lewis Carroll’s Dormouse and E. T. A. Hoffman’s Olimpia. On the rare occasions that she does react to anything it is with a broken doll-like quality: ‘Charlotte eut un petit geste d’impatience qui s’acheva mollement, presque dans l’oubli de ce qui l’avait provoqué’ (UTS, 49). And while Herman’s initial appraisal is dismissive – ‘Cette fille est
idiote, voilà tout’ (UTS, 48) – it is her stupidly ghost-like dimension that he will come to find tantalizingly desirable:

Cette espèce de résignation placide qu’il prévoyait, qu’il lisait déjà dans ses traits immobiles, l’aiguillonnait douloureusement tandis qu’il montait l’escalier, le rendait à la fois nerveux et gai. Il dut faire pour ne pas redescendre immédiatement, empoigner Charlotte, faire monter à son visage cette expression soumise, dépourvue de regret et d’étonnement, pour lui si énigmatique. (UTS, 62–3)

Herman is enraptured by eroticized deadness. It arouses in him a sadistically sexual ‘capacité de puissance et de cruauté infinie’ (UTS, 63); in the face of its soft, insipid mediocrity, he feels positively clever and exciting. ‘Elle charme en moi ce que j’ai de moins bon’ (UTS, 86), Herman concludes, powerless to prevent the onset of a desire that can only be frustrating because it can find nothing in its slippery, stultified object to latch onto. Métilde is somewhat better at making Herman feel attended to – and indeed arrives in L. at the novel’s denouement, ostensibly to protect him from total disintegration (UTS, 133) – yet throughout the novel she has, like her lover Gilbert, resolutely ignored his main problem, the trauma of his family’s extinction:

Il savait très exactement alors quelle expression vague, indifférente ternirait le regard de Métilde, il connaissait jusqu’au ton précis de petit “Bof!” qui s’échapperait des lèvres soudain un peu molles de Gilbert.

Ce qui doit arriver arrivera, disait invariablement l’un ou l’autre. (UTS, 89)

The couple act exactly like the other villagers in their refusal to acknowledge the reality of anything resembling human feelings. Just as the novel’s various Kafkaesque landladies, administrators and police officers pretend, robotically, not to hear what he is saying (‘Le jeune homme hocha la tête, le coin de ses lèvres s’étira mécaniquement en un sourire bienséant et formel’, UTS, 21), Herman’s three youthful friends – who at the same time function for him as desired parent figures – can offer him only the most insubstantial of emotional nourishment. Hyper-sexual zombies all three (the two women seem to be constantly fumbling with one another, and Gilbert’s rapport with Herman has a more than seductive air), they make the more potentially solid work and relationship commitments of Herman’s old life seem altogether boring, far too much like hard work, to the point that ‘[i]l n’était pas loin d’estimer que la fruste existence immobile dans l’hibernation du village était la seule qui valût (UTS, 87). The potentially abusive,
sexualized sluggishness of the four friends is echoed in the general village population, of course: we will later hear of families who sleepily watch pornographic films together, parents and children, over dinner (*UTS*, 114), while the case of a thirteen-year-old child’s rape by her stepfather is ignored by the committee supposed to be discussing it in favour of gastronomic pleasures: ‘On apporta les vol-au-vent et les plateaux de charcuterie’ (*UTS*, 116).

Repeating Fanny’s fatal mistakes, Herman comes to conceive of the village itself as the languid, tantalizing mother whom he has somehow failed to rouse to look after him: ‘Est-ce que le village me reprendra? Est-ce que je pourrai seulement l’atteindre?’ (*UTS*, 132). He takes upon himself the responsibility of not fitting in as he ‘ought’ (‘Qui me pardonnera?’, *UTS*, 132), accepting the implied necessity of his own partial ‘death’ if he is ever to attain a level of integration into this world of affectless wraiths. It is scarcely surprising, given the narrowness of options available to the protagonist, that this novel will find itself as unable to progress, to break new psychic ground for its exhausted characters, as the two that preceded it. The final sentences convey total breakdown at every level: Herman’s material liquefaction sets in, the taxi taking him back to the village breaks down, and the narrative simply gives up the ghost:

> Ah, ah, murmura Herman.  
> Mais la voiture s’arrêta; le chauffeur jura, cognà sur le volant.  
> Ca y est, elle nous lâche! s’écria-t-il. (*UTS*, 142)  

Far from staving off generalized disintegration, the various parent figures that clutter up the denouement – not only Lemaître and Métilde, but also Herman’s randomly encountered father-in-law and mother-in-law – appear to precipitate it (just as the arrival of M. and Mme Carpe at Lazare’s house will, in the later novel, drive a briefly rejuvenated Rosie under once and for all).

But even if this novel ultimately crashes under the weight of its protagonist’s listless depression, 27 it nevertheless demonstrates, largely via its ingenious intrusions of uncanny or fantastical phenomena, a commitment to the aesthetic *disruption* of zombified fatigue. The reader feels truly curious – and thus, I would argue, truly alive – through injections of ghostly strangeness that the flattened characters themselves are unable to register as worthy of wonder. Rose’s frustration and depression led, we were told, to her abdication from life, quickly followed by her spectral dematerialization (*UTS*, 95–100). Herman,
left behind to work somehow with the loss, does so by voiding it from his consciousness and himself becoming blank. The text in which his story is told, however, preserves the radical ‘étrangeté’ at the heart of his existence and thus remains, itself, in life. The depressed ghosts of Rose, Herman’s child and Alfred’s wife will not leave, will not be normalized, no matter how much the social machine attempts to ignore them (UTS, 117–19). Herman and the reader, like the narrator of the later Autoportrait en vert, are forced to register the phantoms’ awful existence, to experience the sad horror they embody as inexplicable (perhaps), evanescent (certainly), but ineluctably real. These spectres represent a crucial psychic advance on the ungraspability at the heart of NDiaye’s earliest fictions, showing us, as they do, that something terrible really has happened. They rather resemble the central features of the talkative taxi driver who speaks the novel’s final words but who is, mysteriously, missing his nose. Like this old man’s undescribed scar-tissue – new, necessary, unnameable flesh – NDiaye’s ghosts are the remnants of wounds, drifting unapologetically across the middle of the novel’s otherwise ‘normotic’ face.