

“The Law of the Family”: Autoimmunity in Turcotte’s *The Body’s Place*

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“It is the persistence, the ineluctable return, in truth, of a sort of aporia or, if you prefer, of an antinomy at the heart of every –nomy, that is, at the source of every autoimmune process.”

(Derrida, *Rogues*)

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the family is the place where a universal narrative of the incest taboo is acted out in the form of a “family romance,” a romance in which, typically, a father forbids the male child from competing with him for the sexual desire of the mother and thereby establishes the child’s gender identity. Freud imagined a daughter competing with the mother for the father’s sexual attention, but the masculine model still predominates in Freudian discourse. Indeed, Slavoj Žižek says that the postmodern historicizing of the family cannot elude this universal patriarchal structure (*Sublime Object* 50; cf. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 200-1). Under the influence of the Marxist Louis Althusser, the family becomes an apparatus for the state, producing citizens as subjects through “interpellation,” or calling individuals into their social roles. By repeating certain actions, we give ideology a material form through the ritual “material practices” of our social roles (“Ideology” 159). Judith Butler combines elements of the psychoanalytic and the Marxist theories of identity but in order to show that gender is a ritual

material practice that can resist the heterosexual (patriarchal) gender norm, or compulsory heterosexuality, by repeating the norm differently and generating new gender identities (*Bodies that Matter* 122). Butler's theory of the family locates a contradiction within the family that resists its universalizing power to produce normative subjects, or a sense of belonging. This contradiction is illustrated in Élise Turcotte's novel *L'Ile de la merci* (1997), translated by Sheila Fischman as *The Body's Place* (2003), and confirmed by Nicole Côté's cogent essay, “*L'Ile de la Merci, ou comment éviter le désastre*” (2006), which argues that gender is something contingently constructed. Côté argues that the main character, Hélène, struggles between a sense of belonging and not belonging. Hélène's attempts to follow the social institutions such as the family that “seem to resist opening, imposing carceral limits,” as demonstrated through her “fantasm of a perfectly sealed body” (50), while at the same time she experiences a feeling of bodily dysphoria that makes her seek to “renegotiate the frontiers of gender” (49).ⁱ

Élise Turcotte's novel shows aspects of all these theoretical models of the family, but she also gives the family a different narrative scheme as her main character, Hélène, thinks to herself about her own family's dysfunctional behaviour, “It's the family comedy” (*Body's Place* 34). Hélène's comment is full of satiric irony and dark humour, because she feels that she does not belong and that her family is, as we shall see, a parody of what a normal, functioning family should be. Even when her mother buys her a new dress, Hélène responds to this gesture of generosity by being “deceptively obedient,” and adds a comment that serves as a structure for the family and the entire novel: “They understand perfectly well the meaning of this comedy: it's short term protection” (*Body's Place* 35). Protection is “short term” because all members of the family attack not only the family bonds that hold them together, but each member attacks his or

her own identity, revealing the body as a place that attacks its own protection, exposing it to a process that Jacques Derrida calls “autoimmunity.”

Turcotte tells the story of *The Body's Place* through Hélène, an adolescent who develops an obsession for one of a series of teenage girls murdered in Montreal, named “Marie-Pierre Sauvé.” The stories reported in the press about Marie-Pierre Sauvé’s tragic death fills a scrapbook kept by Hélène. The entire narrative shows how deeply Hélène is preoccupied with the murdered girl, especially when she asks herself, in response to her boyfriend Thomas’ comment that the murder is just an isolated event, “But how could she listen to him when her own murdered ghost, her other self, kept coming back to her constantly?” (*Body's Place* 141). Hélène’s identification with the murdered teenage girl as “her own murdered ghost, her other self” illustrates well Derrida’s claim that “Ego=Ghost. Therefore “I am” would mean “I am haunted” (*Specters of Marx* 141). The ego is a ghost because, Derrida asserts, “The living ego is autoimmune” (*Specters of Marx* 141). Derrida defines the autoimmune ego in a way that will guide us in our analysis of this character, her relation to her family, and others. Derrida writes:

To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death; difference of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language), it must therefore take the immune defences apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself*. (*Specters of Marx* 141)

Hélène, like her classmates at school, is certainly led unconsciously “to welcome the other within,” particularly the other as a “figure of death,” in order to form her own ego. As she observes early in the narrative:

She pictures her classmates who dash in every so often with news of some overwhelming event. The suicide of an idol last April, or a simple change that’s occurred in their minds. So many stories that never touch her. She remembers reading these words in the paper:

died of a shotgun blast to the head. These words had fascinated her, only the words, and she'd pasted the article into her scrapbook along with the other headlines. (Body's Place 24)

This paragraph by itself covers most of the figures of death listed by Derrida, such as the “difference of the technical apparatus” of the newspaper media (which generate ghostly words and images, that, like the living dead, differ from and defer living “reality”), and the synthetic image implied in the “suicide of an idol.” Hélène feels that most of the “overwhelming events” (suggesting trauma) in the news, “never touch her,” no matter how morbid, until she encounters the reports of Marie-Pierre Sauvé’s murder. The “words,” however, “fascinated her,” especially the violent ones, like the phrase “died of a shotgun blast to the head,” suggesting that perhaps she is being touched by the violence in the events more than she is aware. Since some violent events do not touch her, and others, like the murder of Marie-Pierre Sauvé do, we must now show how and why the immune defences of Hélène’s ego “apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary” are directed for her ego and against it at the same time.

Derrida’s point about autoimmunity, and it will be argued, Turcotte’s as well, is not that we are all, or we must be, suicidal, but rather that the living ego cannot do without its opposite, neither life without death, nor the ego (self) without the other. Regarding the self, or the “*autos*” of autoimmunity, Derrida writes: “It consists not only in committing suicide but in compromising *sui*-or *self*-referentiality, the *self* or *sui*-of suicide itself. Autoimmunity is more or less suicidal, but, more seriously still, it threatens always to rob suicide itself of its meaning and supposed integrity” (Rogues 45). That Hélène’s only sister, Lisa, commits suicide, calls for a direct comparison to clarify the similarities and differences between it and autoimmunity. We will carry out this comparison in the second half of the essay. If there is a significant difference

between Lisa and Hélène, it seems to be that Hélène has no pure, stable, homogeneous self to destroy because as we have just observed, “her own murdered ghost, her other self, kept coming back to her constantly.” Her autoimmunity is not (necessarily) aimed at complete self-annihilation since the supposed integrity of “the *self* or *sui*-of suicide itself” has already been compromised by her identification with Marie Pierre Sauvé, and other ego-ideals, including her mother, before her. This movement of the autoimmune self, and the autoimmune family, between suicide and survival is precisely the struggle depicted by Turcotte’s central character Hélène and her family. Hélène’s dilemma is coping with a world view that tries to divide the world into simple opposites. She discovers that the fixity of oppositional thinking does not work very well, or for long. She tries, for instance, to “Think for a fraction of a second that her family is behind her and dead, never to be alive again, never again to be part of her” (Body’s Place 24). Her identification with Marie-Pierre Sauvé may be said to arise from this attempt to separate herself from her family and the threats of the external world. When she takes a job at a garage, she feels “she is somewhere other than inside herself, for once. She is living someone else’s life” (Body’s Place 22). At the garage, Hélène feels, “Here, she has nothing to protect. Not herself. Not others” (Body’s Place 22). Hélène’s divided self, at certain points, exemplifies an oppositional kind of thinking designed to function as a defence, or immune, system against external threats. The reader gets a sense of this division within Hélène through the extradiegetic narrator, who from outside the events in the narrative, moves omnisciently in and out of the characters:

Hélène has the feeling that she now lives a double life. Both of them real.
In one life, everything is guilty. Everything demands a reaction.
In the other, light and perfect moments exist, because there is nothing and no one
to protect. (Body’s Place 22)

Hélène's double life is at odds with itself, since there is one side that “demands a reaction” to protect herself against feeling guilty for having done something wrong, or worse, *being* wrong; and another side that has “no one to protect.” Ironically, until she learns to take the risk of welcoming the other within, as she does with Marie-Pierre Sauvé, she will never learn that her ego, or selfhood, is not a static thing but a mobile multiplicity of selves made possible through her relation to the people and things that threaten her. By increasing the strength of her defences to an extreme level, Hélène avoids taking chances and consequently becomes increasingly cut off from the people and things that might support her normal mental health, a separation making her feel so isolated, stagnant, and maladapted that, like her sister Lisa, she will become suicidal.

Hélène's obsession with Marie-Pierre Sauvé reflects her inability to define herself with a pure, unchanging, unified identity, especially a gender identity, a place where she might dwell within, or take possession of, her own body. When she attends Marie-Pierre Sauvé's funeral, trying to understand something of the murdered girl's life and death, she approaches Thomas for the first time because he is one of the boys who knew Marie-Pierre. The reader, then, discovers one of the reasons that she is attracted to Thomas: “He was probably the loneliest boy in his class, Hélène thinks. Like her, he didn't belong to any group” (*Body's Place* 79). Hélène, paradoxically, identifies with Thomas' lack of identity. She discovers that she is not alone in her resistance to being defined on the basis of belonging to a family, a civil society, or a national community. Derrida summarizes the paradox of this logic of dislocation: “The desire to belong to any community whatsoever, the desire for belonging *tout court*, implies that one *does not belong*. I could not say ‘I want to be one of the family’ if in fact I *was* one of the family” (*Taste for the Secret* 28). He explains the contradiction in the following way:

*Accounting for one's belonging—be it on national, linguistic, political or philosophical grounds—in itself implies a not-belonging. This can have political consequences: there is no identity. There is identification, belonging is accounted for, but this itself implies that the belonging does not exist, that the people who want to be this or that—French, European, etc.—are *not so* in fact. And they have to know this? This is why the family is something to which one never belongs, to which one always belongs—which is why the family is something so dramatic, because the family (the nation, humanity) has no self-identity. It is never a state.* (*Taste for the Secret* 28)

“Belonging does not exist,” because it is a process, and the process of identification is never complete, in the present, but always to come. The notion that “There is no identity” means that there is not one thing, or substance (in the present), that makes all members of one family, or group, the same, once and for all. As a process, accounting for one’s belonging by not belonging can in one context provide the freedom necessary for a person to distinguish herself or express her singularity, and in another context, not belonging can lead to extreme forms of alienation.

This passage given above from *A Taste for the Secret* (2001), in which Derrida explores the notion that “there is no identity,” but “there is identification,” recalls a similar statement from Derrida’s book *The Other Heading* (1992), where Derrida gives us an axiom on culture itself:

what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself. Not to not have an identity, but not to be able to identify itself, to be able to say ‘me’ or ‘we’; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself or, if you prefer, only in the difference *with itself* [*avec soi*]. There is no culture or cultural identity without this difference *with itself*. (*Other Heading* 9-10)

Derrida insists on the idea that culture, and its institutions, like the family, cannot be “identical with itself,” which is to say, logically, “A cannot be A,” or a thing cannot coincide with itself. For anything to be absolutely present to itself, or in itself, it would be beyond the movement of time, and such a thing would be absolutely resistant to the possibility of change, and therefore, either dead, or immortal (but where immortality would be tantamount to death). Survival depends upon a more changeable, adaptive posture delegating traces of our self to things that

represent, or supplement the self. We will extend Derrida's warning against the dangers of an enclosed self-identity to all kinds of cultural identity, including the central character Hélène, who is able to "take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself or . . . only in the difference *with itself*." Hélène's growing difference with herself, for instance, emerges when she becomes fascinated with a young boy named "Martin" at a boxing club, and she consciously begins to emulate masculine behaviour to gain control over her body. When Hélène gets the chance to act, rather than assuming a new-found confidence, or new level of self-acceptance, she attacks herself, for as the narrator reports, "Right away she starts whacking the punching bag, seeing herself as her own enemy" (Body's Place 67). Hélène sees herself as her own enemy because she believes that being a female is equivalent to being a victim, leading Hélène to see herself as her own enemy. Significantly, she cannot remember the origin of her feeling of victimhood: "Life is a constant danger. And so the menace may have started long before. Maybe it has been inscribed forever, along with fear, in Hélène's body" (Body's Place 15). The "menace . . . started long before" because she is made to feel, from a very early age, ashamed of her female body: "The body circumscribes the menace and it is in the body that shame begins" (Body's Place 15). The reader will discover, along with Hélène's mostly conscious self-diagnosis, that her self-alienation as a female, and her fearful hyper-vigilance, originates within her family, especially through her troubled relationship with her mother.

In order to protect herself from danger, Hélène intensifies the boundary between herself and reality. Hélène describes the difference between herself and the outer world as one of order and disorder. She assumes that if she disciplines her body, she can keep it safe, orderly, and pure: "The inside of my body is a room and everything in that room is clear and in its own place" (Body's Place 3). Drawing the boundary between herself and the world by putting something in

its place, Hélène confirms the anthropologist Mary Douglas's definition of "dirt as matter out of place" (*Purity and Danger* 44). Douglas adds that "Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (44). The primary system for establishing order, and thus the opportunity to transgress that order, for Hélène, is the family system. Owing to some unspecified traumatic family event, though her parents' prolonged estrangement is doubtless the principal cause, Hélène always seems to feel out of place: "everything outside her body seems different, detached, as if such things are part of another reality" (*Body's Place* 5). This opposition between her inner world and the outer world is closely circumscribed by her body, a boundary so carefully guarded that even language can be treated as an object that can be expelled. While studying, Hélène thinks of language and its effects on her and the family: "She is afraid that the contents of the words will spread to them and that they'll catch them, like a disease" (*Body's Place* 37). When she deliberately breaks a plate to upset her mother and lays the blame on her younger brother Samuel, she feels the pain of conscience for her transgression. We get her thoughts unmediated by the narrator this time, but the phrase may still be a response echoing her brother's reaction: "I'm a mean person." Hélène meets this (self) accusation as an invasion of her body:

All at once there's a whirlwind in the room inside her body. Mean, she says. The word appears to her then as a little bit of solid material. She rolls it between her hands. She goes up to her room, opens the window, flings that foreign body into the air, the wind, the leaves. (*Body's Place* 6)

While it is clear that Hélène wants the opposition between the two worlds to protect her from harm, the word "Mean" as the "foreign body" in this case is ambiguous. The only source given for the accusation are the words, "Mean, she says," suggesting that "she," Hélène, is the origin.

We, of course, attribute the use of the word “she” to the mediation of the third-person narration, but it still divides Hélène from herself as the focalizer of the earlier phrase in the first person, “I’m a mean person.” If her words are a response to her younger brother, Hélène uses the word “I” to signal that she takes responsibility for the transgression. At the very least, Hélène internalizes the word “Mean” and its moral force, although it is more likely that Hélène is the origin of the word, and she is attacking her internal sense of order as if her own words were an invading foreign body.

Despite the complexity of Hélène attacking herself through the foreignness of her own language, we should take this opportunity to note its similarity with Hélène’s attack on the protection that she gets from (and gives to) her family, since both language and family are cultural institutions that shape our sense of belonging. Hélène illustrates Derrida’s principle that the very things that mark our identity, such as our signature, are in fact what we cannot appropriate or make our own because they are a part of a process that interrupts our selfhood, and, as interruption, always come before us and make the self possible in the first place. Derrida writes:

When I say that, basically, I write for those with whom I share a language, culture, place, home, it is not a question of “belonging” to communities, of property or ownership, because I would say about language what I have just said about the signature. French, for example, is “my” language, I have no others, but at the same time it is radically foreign to me—it does not “belong” to me, it is not my property. It is to this extent that “I have my” idiom. Place, family, language, culture, are not my own, there are no places that “belong.” I do not want to deny the fact that I talk, all the time, about something that does resemble a “belonging”; I know perfectly well that I write on the basis of my age, culture, family, language, but my relation to these seemingly communal structures is one of expropriation, of dis ownership. I no more belong to these things than they belong to me; my point of departure is where this belonging has broken.

(Taste for the Secret 85)

Derrida says that language is “radically foreign to me,” as the character Hélène does, because language is something we try to master, or possess, but never can. Language is there before we learn to speak it, makes our identity possible, and it functions without us when we are absent from it. Furthermore, since we share the language with others, we can never say, as individuals, that my language belongs to me, or that “it is my property.” Language does make one’s particular way of speaking, one’s style, or one’s idiom possible, but insofar as it participates in the generality of a shared language, it is never entirely one’s own. The difference between the standard language use and one’s own singular style signifies a break, or difference, in language. In other words, a singular person belongs to a language, or to one’s family, “where this belonging has broken.” We may adapt a phrase from Derrida to refer to this difference, where belonging has broken, between the singular idiom and the universal language, as “belonging without belonging,” because the singular idiom breaks from, but also participates in, the universal language (“The Law of Genre” 230).

To isolate the familial paradox of belonging without belonging, Turcotte’s Hélène focuses directly on the family at a significant point late in the narrative, revealing the contradictory movement of things inward and outward with respect to the family system. This contradictory movement inward and outward is described by Hélène in terms of the two laws of the family. These two laws contradict each other and can be referred to as an antinomy, an antinomy being defined as “The contradiction in a law, or between two equally binding laws” (*OED*). This antinomy or contradiction between the two laws of the family represents a moment of autoimmunity. Autommunity, as Derrida defines it, is the condition in which “A living being in a quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (*Philosophy* 94). Now the contradiction, or aporia, of the two laws

can lead to a negative result, or a psychological paralysis, that in one character leads to suicide (which is the case with Hélène's sister, Lisa), but the contradiction may also act as the point of a crisis that makes ethical responsibility possible because it forces one to choose between two equally determinate and necessary demands. The argument can now be made that Hélène faces the impossible situation of two contradictory laws of the family and then must decide what to do. Derrida, after Kierkegaard, says, "The instant of decision is madness" ("Force of Law" 29), but Hélène must decide to act or remain caught in a feeling of paralysis as a victim of her feminine gender.

The trigger, as it were, for this undecidable moment of the antinomy is a visit to her family by Hélène's boyfriend, Thomas. Hélène's internal monologue brings her to comment upon her family's reaction to the visitation of Thomas, a boy with whom she has had her first sexual encounter. Needless to say, her first sexual encounter is a mixed experience, especially given the family's fearful awareness of the series of seven murdered teenage girls. Other aspects of the family context also serve to concentrate Hélène's feeling of alienation from the family. For example, the two siblings symbolically objectify Hélène's fear, much like her scrapbook on the murdered girls, and Marie Pierre Sauvé: Lisa, because she is "delicate, defenseless; the opposite of Hélène" (Body's Place 11); and her younger brother, Samuel, because of his "dictionary of monsters" (Body's Place 127). Lisa's habitual absence and silence throughout the story reveals another index of the trauma Hélène is feeling. Hélène, for example, takes Samuel to the Bordeaux jail near the site where Marie-Pierre Sauvé has been murdered, and she asks him to keep it a secret. He agrees, asking what else about their trip he should keep secret. Hélène says, "Lots of other things, you'll see," and as Samuel thinks it over, he then says, "Lisa's got more secrets," to which Hélène says nonchalantly, "That's true" (Body's Place 98). The silence and

the secrets betray a toxic family atmosphere which does not allow the direct, and honest, expression of feeling. Hélène provides a glimpse of the gaps growing within the family system when she recounts what she observes to be the rules by which the family lives, rules established within the context of the estranged relationship between the parents, Robert and Viviane:

It's the law of the family, murmurs Hélène. To defend oneself. In all circumstances.

She drops her bag onto a bench across from the Métro and sits down to wait for Thomas. Lisa was wrong. Viviane let her go out. Shrugged: "I'm not responsible for what happens to you any more." Which means, to Hélène, "You're leaving me alone so I'm not responsible for anything."

The law of the family: a circle in the middle of the world, a jail in the shape of a star. "Girls your age have boyfriends," said Robert to Hélène.

And indirectly to Lisa.

Again this business about boyfriends! Again that irreproachable need to drive the children outside. Each has his role to play: another law of families. But the circles get bigger near the borders. Harder and harder to control.

Hélène is there now. At the border. (Body's Place 88)

Of these two laws of the family, Derrida might say, "It is the persistence, the ineluctable return, in truth, of a sort of aporia or, if you prefer, of an antinomy at the heart of every –nomy, that is, at the source of every autoimmune process" (Rogues 47-48). Derrida calls attention to the suffix "nomy" derived from the Greek word for law, "*nomos*," hence the etymology of "antinomy" as "anti" or "against," and "*nomos*" (OED). The antinomy situates Hélène "At the border"; the antinomy of being both inside and outside the family at the same time "risks paralysis and thus calls for the event of an interruptive decision" (Rogues 35).

Hélène's first law of defending oneself "in all circumstances" is formed within the context of the public narrative about Marie-Pierre Sauvé regarding the real dangers of violence against women. The irony is that the defence system is ambiguous, and may also be aimed at the family itself, especially since Hélène calls the family a "jail." She has to build an immunity to

the very family that she is supposed to help protect, or to call upon to protect and defend her. Hélène complains, in the second law, about the “irreproachable need to drive the children outside.” The word “drive” suggests a strong, compelling force, and may not be a conscious behaviour on the parents’ part, or it may simply be an exaggeration on Hélène’s part. In any case, “driving,” or “urging,” the children outside the family is not always unhealthy, since “Each has his role to play: another law of families.” Each child needs to individuate and learn independence, so a certain measure of alienation from the family is normal and expected. Hélène, however, feels caught between the extremes of complete immersion in the family and complete independence from it, leaving her unprepared and excessively fearful of what comes in the future. The need for emotional support is not satisfied within the family system, so the intense desire to be outside the family is mixed, for Hélène, with the equally painful feeling that she is being forced out prematurely. She underscores her desire to be outside the family again, when a little later she is annoyed at Thomas’ efforts to get along with the family and her father in particular. Thomas lies about the details of his (sexual) relationship with Hélène, but it is not enough to satisfy her need to separate herself from her family. The narrator gives Hélène’s thoughts:

Now she is angry at having seen Thomas behave, despite his lies, like a member of the family. A member of society, a member of the world, when she wants him to be outside with her. (Body’s Place 111)

Thomas has feelings for Hélène, and so his desire to behave “like a member of the family” is understandable. Thomas’ desire to belong with the family, his desire to be “A member of society. A member of the world,” comes in direct conflict with Hélène’s desire to have him “outside with her.” Hélène’s autoimmune reaction to her family system in which her sense of belonging is

broken, can in one context be read as an illness that narrows her choices and leads to her destruction. On the other hand, if not belonging is understood in a positive sense that allows room for critique of oneself and one's family, then Hélène can affirm her exposure to what is coming in the future, for better or for worse, leaving at least the chance to expand her social horizons, open up the limits of her power, and turn the autoimmune event into a survival strategy.

Autoimmune Illness and Sacrifice

Autoimmunity, defined as a living being's effort, in "quasi-*suicidal* fashion," to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its 'own' immunity, acts *as if* it were trying to kill itself without actually doing so. The autoimmune "self" is already divided, or compromised, so the attack is not directed at the entire self; only one part of the living being is directed against another part that immunizes, or protects, that living being. The autoimmune structure can benefit or "save" the living being as a whole, and in certain respects, resembles the process of sacrifice, particularly self-sacrifice. The difference between autoimmunity and sacrifice, however, is that autoimmunity contaminates the living being with what attacks it in order to better survive, while sacrifice (like an immune response) expels or excludes the contaminating thing from the living being in the name of purity. Another point of shared similarity between autoimmunity and sacrifice is that both processes reach a point in which the inside and the outside become impossible to maintain, because of the ambiguous status of the thing that contaminates the living body, individual or social. In the case of autoimmunity, when the very process or thing that destroys the living being also protects it, that process or thing is referred to by Derrida, in his analysis of Plato in *Dissemination*, as a *pharmakon*, defined as both a "medicine" that heals, and a "poison" that kills (*Dissemination* 98; cf. Rogues 157). A figure closely related to the

pharmakon in Derrida's analysis of Plato is referred to in Greek as a *pharmakos*, or a "scapegoat," in which the foreign object contaminating the social body is a person. Within the confines of the community, the scapegoat is a contaminating "poison," whereas once the scapegoat is thrown outside the community, it acts as a "medicine," curing the society of its ills by purifying it (Dissemination 133). For Derrida, the scapegoat as "the representative of the outside is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside" (Dissemination 133). In *The Body's Place*, Lisa will serve to illustrate the role of the self-sacrificing scapegoat who tries to heal the family by purifying it, while Hélène illustrates the autoimmune process that depends upon contamination of the self and the family to survive.

The clearest evidence of Lisa as a sacrificial figure comes after Hélène discovers that her sister has committed suicide. The narrator relates the way Hélène feels about the event in terms of her parent's reaction:

Hélène wishes she could cry out into her parents' faces disfigured by their inability to comprehend: Lisa wasn't Lisa.
Lightness, secret, sacrifice.
And me, I'm, not myself. (*Body's Place* 149)

The parents fail to appreciate the complexity of either Lisa's, or Hélène's, multiple identities, especially the identities developed outside their family roles. Lisa's identity is characterized by "Lightness. Secret. Sacrifice." Lisa believes, for instance, "If reasons are to light us from the inside, she has said, you have to practice letting them come to the surface" (*Body's Place* 65). The oppositions in Lisa's statement between surface and depth, light and dark, spontaneity and "practice," strongly suggest that Lisa is divided from herself in some profound way. Only in retrospect do the oppositions become ominously related to her dysfunctional habit of keeping too

many secrets from her family. The secrets are related to a kind of psychological and emotional repression, a repression deeply imbricated in the family silences and lack of communication. At one point, for example, Hélène complains, “School’s been out for a week already and not one word has been uttered in this house, not one word that has been truly sensed, real and significant” (Body’s Place 8-9). Lisa’s secrecy implies that she is hiding her true feelings from the family, repressing her feelings, perhaps, as a sacrifice for the family peace.

Trying to “locate the moment when the menace began” (Body’s Place 14), Hélène reflects on the family’s past, and when she comes around to Lisa, she makes a remark that reveals a great deal about her sister’s personality: “Lisa who never says anything. Lisa, who plays at being someone who doesn’t exist” (Body’s Place 14). Lisa’s secrecy contributes to the systemic problem of silence in the family, and to her lethal tendency to self-sacrifice. Later, when Hélène recounts her sexual experience with Thomas to Lisa, the conversation concludes with her sister’s reaction: “‘It’s disgusting,’ says Lisa” (Body’s Place 101). Bodily contact is “disgusting” because it is “dirty,” or matter out of place. Her words bring the sisters to laughter, but as Hélène remembers Thomas’ “warm body,” she observes, “She feels her own skin as if it were someone else’s: suddenly full of promises and density. Lisa’s body on the contrary has already disappeared” (Body’s Place 102). Both Lisa and Hélène feel alienated from their bodies. Lisa’s disappearing body is, nevertheless, a much more radical alienation that not only foreshadows her suicide, but also establishes an attitude and pattern of behaviour consistent with various kinds of repression, the sexual now compounding the emotional and the psychological. Confirming further Lisa’s sacrificial self, Hélène, with her usual perceptiveness, muses about her conversations with Lisa concerning Thomas and sexuality: “An hour later, Hélène leaves the house, still trying to be reasonable: there’s no use talking about it. If she mentioned the pain, Lisa

could start believing in the need for pain. She'd think it was a way of approaching purity" (Body's Place 120). Like Hélène, Lisa believes her material body is polluted, and therefore always out of place, especially with regard to the family system. Belief in the "need for pain" signifies Lisa's growing religious asceticism, which manifests itself as self-denial needed to mortify the body in order to purify it spiritually, and protect her from the temptations of the flesh.

Lisa's goal of "approaching purity" through pain seems close to being realized when "She has restored order to her room, thrown several old things into a bag. Then she got her hair cut" (Body's Place 143). She will now accomplish what Hélène has been aiming at through her system of order and purity to avoid danger. When Robert and Viviane notice Lisa's change in appearance, they are "outraged, mainly because she did it without asking their opinion" (Body's Place 143). Hélène comes to her defence, fooled as much by Lisa's apparent normality as her parents are because they share the same family (and gender) ideology of preserving the boundaries of normality and order:

Then they feel relieved: Lisa is getting ready for school, she's better now, soon order will be restored.

Hélène looks at Lisa and thinks for a moment.

"Now you look even more like an angel."

"An angel face," say Lisa later, as she studies her reflection in the mirror. As if it were possible to make what you want to be inside coincide with what appears on the outside!

Wings grow inside, not outside, thinks Lisa.

Not outside.

She smiles. That thought is absolutely intoxicating.

Wings grow, they take over the heart and the mind, they finally cast a shadow on the body, on the present, the future, on words, matter—on every object that constitutes chaos. (Body's Place 144)

What appears to be Lisa “getting ready for school” is actually Lisa preparing to commit suicide. Lisa’s resemblance to an “angel” means, traditionally, that she is “a lovely, bright, innocent, or gracious being” (*OED*, 1.d). We may define Lisa’s “innocence,” again referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as “Doing no evil; free from moral wrong, sin, or guilt (in general); pure, unpolluted.” Similar to Hélène, Lisa constructs a system of oppositions between order and chaos, inside and outside, to establish an impossible purity, a purity that can only be attained if her inner spiritual ascension interrupts her outer, material existence, or her “Wings grow inside . . . take over her heart and mind [and] cast a shadow on the body, on the present, the future, on words, matter—on every object that constitutes chaos.” When Hélène says that “order will be restored,” she refers to the spiritual, or metaphysical, desire to put things in their proper place, a hierarchical place in which the interior purity of spiritual discipline makes the “inside coincide with what appears on the outside” by making the dirty, material chaos of the body’s exteriority disappear. Lisa sacrifices the material chaos of her body to the extreme demands of spiritual order so that she can avoid the danger of contaminating her family or herself with the “menace.”

Lisa makes the inside coincide with the outside by sacrificing her body to attain spiritual purity, and the place where she attains that purity, by committing suicide in the attic, reinforces the sacrificial act with a sacred, hierarchical topography. Viviane’s renovation of the house is a metaphor for the family. While much of the house has been renovated, only the attic renovation brings about the most significant family event of Lisa’s death. The attic, nevertheless, does not succeed as a symbol of renewal as her mother hoped, but as the symbol of love lost between husband and wife:

The house isn’t big enough, this is the easy conclusion she’s come to. It’s why she is sitting at the kitchen table, over plans drawn by an apprentice architect. After she has

enlarged the kitchen, renovated the bathroom, redecorated the living room, all that was left was to fix up the room in the attic. The house doesn't have a basement.

"It's a room for me," she informs Robert by means of a thousand hints.

In any case, he couldn't care less. This time he really doesn't give a shit. (Body's Place 106)

Thinking about the stairs to the renovated attic, Viviane feels she is "climbing towards the figurative sense of her freedom" (Body's Place 129). She expresses her joy at the prospect being alone in the attic:

The moment when she'll be able to sit down, alone at last, in this all-white space will be a moment of redemption. A well-earned rest.

"I'm going up to heaven," she sometimes tells her daughters to let them know that she's going to check on the work. (Body's Place 129)

Hélène takes the opportunity to mock her mother's self-made sanctuary: "If heaven is up above, hell is down below, says Hélène with a smile. The bedrooms represent purgatory and hell is down below" (Body's Place 138). The mood of Hélène's humor is quickly reversed by the gravity of Lisa's grafting Aztec cosmology onto the Christian. Lisa says that hell is not below but on earth, and adds rather cryptically that the Aztecs "'believed that hell was made up of nine plains'" (Body's Place 138). After confusing Hélène, who has been talking about the household, her sister explains: "'It's the number that counts' declares Lisa. 'Numbers are always symbols.' Seven murders. Nine plains." (Body's Place 138). This reference to the series of seven murdered teenage girls is the first time that the narrative explicitly shows Lisa and Hélène thinking about the same menace of violent death. Given that the context of the conversation began with the two sisters comparing cosmological systems as symbols of the family household, the numerical sequence leads one to conclude that Lisa may be counting herself and Hélène as the remaining two victims in the series.

Lisa's suicide in the very attic that was to serve as her mother's redemption, her Heaven, is ironic on at least three important levels. In the first place, Lisa's suicide attacks the first law of the family to "defend oneself. In all circumstances." She has violated the family "circle in the middle of the world" from within. Secondly, it fulfills in a surprising way the second law of the family, "the irreproachable need to drive the children outside." Lisa may have had as one of her motives "this business about boyfriends," a feeling of failure for not having developed a relationship with a boyfriend so that she could enlarge the circle of the family. Lisa chooses death, instead, as a way to step outside the family circle and make it "bigger near the borders." Thirdly, Lisa also makes the attic a room of redemption through her suicide since she has sacrificed her body in order to attain her purity, whether it is sexual purity, or the fantasy of religious purity. As the Latin etymology of the word "sacrifice" suggests, "*sacer*" or "holy" and "*facere*," "to do, to make" (Encyclopedia 7,997), Lisa makes the dirty, chaotic matter of her body into something sacred in death by sacrificing it. Lisa's decision is an instant of madness in a tragic sense, and we might say, to quote the title of a classic feminist study of nineteenth-century literature by Susan M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, she has gone from being the "“angel of the house”" to "“the madwoman in the attic.”" The transformation of Lisa's body follows that ambiguous figure of the *pharmakon*, from a poison that needs to be thrown out of her life, and out of the family, to a medicine that she hopes will purge the family of its impurity and thus its illness. It is doubtful, however, that Lisa's suicide will strengthen the family ties, or bring about any change, since, from Hélène's perspective, even her mother believes that her attempt to change things by planning to renovate the attic will fail:

Nothing must move here. Everything has its place and it must stay there. And then the dust, the noise, the impatient chaos. Her parents always on the verge of a nervous breakdown, because the end of the work must at all costs mark the end of their failure.

Finally, the worst of all, is the resumption of normal life, as if nothing has changed. Nothing has changed. Viviane's grey eyes always end up saying. Nothing will ever change. (Body's Place 108)

It is the mother Viviane whose eyes communicate the message that "Nothing will ever change."

Hélène inherits from her mother this emotionally and psychologically static world, for she begins by saying, "Nothing must move here." Lisa's goal of purity, furthermore, cannot change the family because the purity of her self-sacrifice means removing an impurity and preserving the homogeneity of the family's self-identity without adding anything new or different. The trauma and stigma of her suicide simply replace the impurity that Lisa hoped to erase by disappearing.

Hélène identifies with Lisa's self-sacrifice, for as the narrator says, "It should have been me, Hélène would like to say" (Body's Place 150). Hélène "would like to say" it should have been her instead of Lisa, but Lisa's experience, despite living in the same household, was quite different. Hélène recognizes the difference when she thinks, "what was burning inside her had finally touched Lisa. But it should have been her. Hanged. Buried. Forgotten as a person" (Body's Place 150). Hélène was certainly not "Forgotten as a person," since, unlike Lisa who was "training herself to disappear into a genuine limbo" (Body's Place 105), she has had intense relationships with her family members, with Martin, and with Thomas. Hélène identifies with, and understands, Lisa's quasi-religious self-sacrifice because she believed, perhaps, at some point, that she should not sacrifice, or harm, others to protect herself, or the family. Hélène, like Lisa, learns that the cost of protecting her family, or any other, is, not sacrificing others, but sacrificing her self. Not sacrificing others, or self-sacrifice, is therefore a way of sacrificing sacrifice itself. Derrida equates "autoimmunization and the sacrifice of sacrifice," for he argues, "The latter always represents the same movement, the price to pay for not injuring or wronging

the absolute other” (“Faith and Knowledge” 52). Yet Hélène does not aim for purity as Lisa does, so she can protect herself by attacking her own defence system, or immune response, and allow the outside in, as she does with the figure of Marie-Pierre Sauvé.

Autoimmune “Redemption”

Turcotte does not hesitate to depict the emotional devastation brought about by Lisa’s suicide, but what makes the novel so interesting is that the final chapter recounting Lisa’s suicide is called “Redemption.” The tragic irony of the title suggests that Lisa’s suicide, by negative example, somehow “redeems,” which is to say, “saves,” or “liberates,” Hélène from the same fate as a consequence of the family’s disastrous dysfunction. Hélène’s redemption, however, begins before Lisa’s suicide. Autoimmunity itself is an automatic process that exposes us to the unpredictable alterity of the future, so that we cannot experience the good of what is coming without risking the worst at the same time. Exposing ourselves to that which undecidedly threatens to destroy us, or promises to save us, goes beyond the conscious control of the human subject, so autoimmunity cannot, by itself, be redemptive in any direct way. What we may call an “autoimmune redemption” would be a situation in which the character avoids the closure of a pure, homogenous self and not only accepts, but cultivates, the risks of openness to a threat of evil so that the promise of good coming in the future is not foreclosed. Derrida refers to this as “autoimmune indemnification” (“Faith and Knowledge” 42), a paradoxical form of protection that is aptly summed up by Alice Andrews: “What autoimmunity protects is risk, in order to *conserve*, maintain, and sustain the ‘promise’ of the future, for better or worse” (“Autoimmune Illness” 196).

Without the autoimmune paradox of protecting the risk of an unforeseeable future, Derrida argues, an event, or true change, is impossible:

If an event worthy of this name is to arrive or happen, it must, beyond all mastery, affect passivity. It must touch an exposed vulnerability, one without absolute immunity, without indemnity; it must touch the vulnerability in its finitude and in a non-horizontal fashion, there where it is not yet or is already no longer possible to face or face up to the unforeseeability of the other. In this regard, autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to *what* and *who* comes—which means that it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive; we would no longer wait, await, or expect, no longer expect one another, or expect any event. (Rogues 152)

When Hélène first hears the words “It’s Lisa” from her younger brother Samuel, she does not know Lisa has committed suicide, but she has the thought: “*Something has happened, something has finally happened*” (Body’s Place 148). Autoimmunity must be “beyond all mastery, affect a passivity,” since it is openness to what catches us by surprise, even though we, like Hélène, have been waiting for something indefinable in its otherness to happen. The autoimmune event “must touch an exposed vulnerability, one without absolute immunity,” for absolute immunity would mean being completely protected from anything exterior to the self, and therefore absolutely incapable of any experience or change. In Hélène’s terms, she fears the absolute immunity of the family where “Nothing will ever change,” and the family would become a jail. Obviously, Lisa has exposed the family as vulnerable to an autoimmune event that shatters the elaborate defence mechanisms it has worked so hard to construct. Derrida goes on to say that “Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen,” because we would be immune to the passage of time, to change, or to risk, and the possibility of promise, of any kind.

We can now isolate a significant difference between Lisa and Hélène in their attitudes toward the menacing threat of violence symbolized so well by the figure of Marie-Pierre Sauvé. Whereas Lisa closes herself off from the outside by preserving the purity of her identity and her sexuality, Hélène attempts to build up an impassable immune system to close herself to the

outside, but her actions repeatedly expose her to the risks of otherness, and she slowly changes her outlook. Lisa dies keeping the reasons, or non-reasons, for her suicide to herself, as we read from Hélène's internal monologue: "Lisa's non-reason has been extinguished with her" (Body's Place 151). The crucial moment of change for Hélène comes when she says to herself, "*If I look at things differently, they will be different*" (Body's Place 140). This moment may appear to be a kind of constructionist philosophy, whereby meaning is not inherent in reality but constructed by society, or a theory of preformative utterances in which the words "perform the actions to which they refer" (Culler 95), such as when we make a promise. However, we will also read it as an example of Hélène's affirmative venture of difference and change in her worldview. Hélène's desire to see things differently marks a departure from her former self's tendency to an oppositional thinking that separates the inside and the outside, toward a new approach that acknowledges an exchange between the two. She must struggle hard, for example, to resist her family's habit of fostering fear that encourages a strong defensive reaction and even moments of traumatic fear. The daily shower becomes one such occasion for the mother to instill fear in the females:

"Hélène, get out of the shower!"

But why is her mother in such a hurry? After all, Hélène thinks, she's the one who taught her to be so clean. She's always said that you had to be clean before anything else. To be ready for anything that might crop up. Because you never know. Anything can happen, without warning. One day or another someone might come too close, lean across, sense desire. Even if it doesn't exist. Even if it has never existed. And anyone else at all can sniff fear. (Body's Place 38)

The imperative to clean the body begins as a precaution for the possibility of a sexual encounter, but it quickly changes into a warning against sexual predation and violence. Both sexuality and violence are an ever-present danger posed by the other's proximity to the body. The female's

sexual desire is perversely turned against her because “someone might come too close, lean across, sense desire. Even if it doesn’t exist.” Of course, the real threat is the desire of the (male) other, who imagines the female’s desire even if it does not exist. Should one actually fear a threat, however, that fear is also turned against the female since “anyone else at all can sniff fear,” providing yet another opportunity for an act of aggression. In any case, the female is betrayed by her physical body and its natural responses.

The family’s culture of fear is raised to such a high level when they encounter the serial murders that the trauma extends their fear into the future. Hélène’s reaction to her feeling of vulnerability is to carefully document the menace, and although “what was burning inside her had finally touched Lisa,” Lisa’s reaction, judging by her silence, appears more like denial and repression. Hélène’s obsession with Marie-Pierre Sauvé is certainly consistent with some measure of traumatic fear, since she repeatedly thinks about the murder, but she cannot be said to be repressing or denying the event of her murder. In other words, Hélène’s efforts to work through the trauma will ensure that she does not suffer excessively, or too long, from an autoimmune illness, or pathology, as Derrida describes it. Referring to traumatic events like the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City, on September 9/11, Derrida writes: “Yet all these efforts to attenuate or neutralize the effect of the traumatism (to deny, repress, or forget it, to get over it) are but so many desperate attempts. And so many autoimmunitary movements. Which produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome” (Philosophy 99). The reason Derrida says trauma will “produce, invent, and feed the very monstrosity they claim to overcome” is that trauma produces an unconscious compulsion to repeat the trauma. Indeed, Lisa’s failure to psychologically, or emotionally, work through the trauma of the serial murders as Hélène has, does “produce, invent, and feed the very

monstrosity” she claims to overcome, since her suicide, her self-murder, makes her the eighth in the series. The family’s efforts to immunize itself against the threat through fear also produces the very conditions for Lisa’s autoimmune illness and actual suicide. The most perilous aspect of the autoimmune illness, according to Derrida, is that trauma creates a fear of the future: “Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with’” (Philosophy 97). We have already noted Lisa’s fear of an unknown future when her wings, or spirituality, “cast a shadow on the body, on the present, the future.” Lisa’s desire for spiritual purity elicits from her a belief in destiny, a predetermined future that is already known, and so no freedom to choose a real future at all: “Each thing, each being has its destiny, her sister Lisa always says” (Body’s Place 56). When Hélène says, “*If I look at things differently, they will be different,*” she is talking about the future—what “will be”—but saying things will be different in no way predetermines or limits the future, despite knowing that the future is always different, in time, from the present.

Before Lisa commits suicide, Hélène has the uncanny feeling that something is wrong: “The place for the new beginning isn’t finished yet. Something has changed, but no one knows what. Hell is made up of plains that are too peaceful” (Body’s Place 143). Hélène’s mention of the nine plains of Hell refers to Lisa’s interest in the Aztec mythology, linking the premonition of death specifically to Lisa. But she also foresees a redemptive “new beginning,” something creative and positive coming out of something so painful and destructive. Hélène looks at Lisa’s suicide with honesty and feels the pain of the loss, but perhaps because her mourning for Marie-Pierre Sauvé has been an advanced unconscious mourning for the loss of her sister, she does not shield herself from the truth. The narrator reports that Hélène has suffered so long the feeling of emptiness of the house that she observes “The explosion of such cries in the house of silence” as

if in relief. Then the narrator writes through Hélène as the focalizer, “She hears the attic breathing above her” (Body’s Place 150). These few lines take part in the general revival in Hélène’s attitude toward her life, her family, and her surroundings. In the past, for Hélène, not being herself was a way of escaping the emptiness of her family’s emotional bonds. Here, the lack of identity, her belonging without belonging, provides an opportunity to adapt to the family trauma, and Lisa’s suicide opens new, previously unconsidered possibilities. Hélène remembers the year that has passed, while where Marie-Pierre Sauvé is concerned, “she has taken her obsession to its logical conclusion,” and where Thomas is concerned, she has “experienced love, which for her was non-love.” But all of that is, she believes, normal:

Normal, like growing up in a house filled with hidden possibilities, like temporary possibilities—a pounding heart, terror.

If you look at life differently, everything can of course slip into the ordinary world. That’s the way it is. The world of trees. The world of bodies rotting in the earth. The world of oblivion. (Body’s Place 142)

The “world of bodies rotting” and the “world of oblivion” now “slip into the ordinary world,” not detached, outside her life. Even “terror” has become a part of her life, for terror includes the violent, traumatic death of adolescents like Marie-Pierre Sauvé.

Hélène’s recognition that death is a normal part of “the ordinary world,” rather than limiting her, brings her to the point where she can walk by the boxing club where Martin trains, and she can “regain that impression of fraternity, of protection, of abduction. But not shame, there won’t be any more shame” (Body’s Place 143). The lack of shame indicates that Hélène refuses to be defensive about her body, accepting its vulnerability as normal too, leaving her open to the “impression of fraternity, of protection” that boxing gives to anyone who goes there.

Hélène has found a way to feel differently than her former self has made her feel in the past, particularly at the moment when speaking to her mother about Marie-Pierre Sauvé:

She takes a deep breath. She hopes that her mother won't talk about the murder of Marie-Pierre Sauvé. She hopes that there aren't any stabs to be delivered with the help of the perfect conditional. That she won't say the word 'safe.' You see, Hélène, outside we aren't safe from anything. As if they are here. (Body's Place 34)

Hélène, however, can only feel safe, she can only save herself, if she is different from the person that her family's fears, her mother's fears, want her to be. Hélène must therefore immunize herself against that fear that she has internalized as a family ideology. Hélène must return to the figure of her own autoimmunity, Marie-Pierre Sauvé.

Marie-Pierre Sauvé's name and narrative provide a central example of autoimmunity, or the kind of belonging to a group, in this case the female gender, which occurs at the very same time that one feels one does not belong. In the first place, "Marie-Pierre" is a combination of both a masculine and a feminine name, symbolizing Hélène's identification with both genders. Ironically, Hélène's plan to protect herself from male violence is to assume the very same masculine attributes of aggression and violence by imitating young boxers because "they have perfect control over their bodies" (Body's Place 57). Hélène even takes a job at a garage to escape her family where she learns to identify and admire the orderly elegance of the male owner, Emile's, body movements as he repairs cars. At one point, as if to indicate symbolically the constructed nature of the gendered body, the garage is referred to as a "body shop" (Body's Place 130). Hélène's desire to embody masculine traits of bodily "order" internalizes the very thing that threatens her. She rejects the female body represented by Marie-Pierre Sauvé because of its traditional associations with passivity and the guilt of victimization. Hélène's fear of

internalizing these feminine traits is directly related to her need for the “masculine” protection of aggression and anger:

Marie-Pierre Sauvé was certainly guilty, too, when she left her house. Or maybe only furious: she walked too fast and took a false step, just one false step that caused her to stumble, then fall into the trap. Or maybe the false step was already inscribed in her. Didn’t Hélène hear a teacher of self-defence explaining on television that most victims have the gait of a victim. The movements and the body of a victim. So she was guilty, or sad, or totally despondent, but not enraged. Marie-Pierre Sauvé was walking with her head down, brooding over something, as Hélène is now, that’s why the man noticed her and that’s why she fell into the trap. If she had been enraged, she’d have fought, she would have torn the man to pieces and transported the body to the Parc de la Merci.(Body’s Place 54)

The narrative Hélène creates reverses the role of criminal perpetrator and victim because she identifies so strongly with Marie-Pierre Sauvé as a female, but she does not want to become another “dead body,” and so desires a different outcome for herself. This role reversal could be interpreted as another example of autoimmune logic if one interprets the act of attacking one’s “self-defence” as a strategy for survival. Hélène, for instance, focuses her criticism on the fact that “Marie-Pierre Sauvé was walking with her head down, brooding over something, as Hélène is now, that’s why the man noticed her and that’s why she fell into the trap.” There is nonetheless, another level of role reversal in the short narrative of self-defence that strongly indicates the presence of autoimmune logic in Hélène’s thinking at this early point in the story.

If we examine the emotional states at the beginning and the end of Hélène’s imaginary scenario, we discover the ambiguous figure of the *pharmakon* at work. In the very beginning, Hélène compares Marie-Pierre Sauvé’s feelings with the way she feels at the moment. Hélène feels guilty for leaving the house in anger and disturbing the family peace: “Marie-Pierre Sauvé was certainly guilty, too, when she left the house. Or maybe only furious too.” Marie-Pierre, like

Hélène, is guilty of being in a state of fury because she leaves her house, a symbol of the overprotective family that, for Hélène, induces the state of fury in the first place. Marie-Pierre's first "false step" in defending herself is caused by being in a "fury," even though the emotional state that leads to her survival in this imagined scenario, being "enraged," is synonymous with fury. The thing that kills her also protects or saves her: "If she had been enraged, she'd have fought, she would have torn the man to pieces and transported the body to the Parc de la Merci." Fury, or rage, a form of anger often manifested in response to the violation of one's boundaries, ironically functions as a *pharmakon* in this context, acting as both the poison that brings about the murder; and the medicine, or cure, that saves the victim from harm. At this early stage in the story, Hélène has internalized her mother's, and the society's, view of females as weak and passive, leading to her fatalistic view of gender embodied as feminine, for she says of Marie-Pierre Sauvé, "the false step was already inscribed in her." The very site of Marie-Pierre Sauvé's murder, the Parc de la Merci, also unconsciously reinforces the ambiguity of the *pharmakon* in Hélène's mind since she comments on the close proximity of the Parc, located on Montreal Island, to the Notre-Dame-de-la-Merci hospital for the chronically ill, and the Bordeaux jail. Although both places, in Hélène's mind, are a "jail one never leaves; a place to die" (*Body's Place* 85-86), paradoxically, the jail protects society on the outside from the criminals inside, and the hospital takes people from the outside so it can protect their health on the inside. Both places also require acts of mercy to function, the hospital to care for the dying, and the jail to offer mercy to the merciless criminal through such things as incarcerating them humanely instead of sentencing them to death, forgiving their crime with a fair, or lighter, sentence, and early parole for good behaviour. In fact, the novel's title in French, *L'Île de la merci*, refers to Montreal Island where these two institutions are found, symbolizing extreme forms of merciful protection,

and between which Hélène initiates her compassionate, or merciful, protection of Marie-Pierre Sauvé's memory.

As the island of mercy, Montreal Island symbolizes the autoimmune movement of the body for Hélène's family and her own body. The Notre-Dame-de-la-Merci hospital, for example, appears at first, in Hélène's view, to be “a place to die,” but she adds a little later, “The hospital may have been located there precisely to remove any urge to die, Hélène often says, and to show that there are worse things” (Body’s Place 86). The effect of a hospital for the chronically ill on the prisoners in the jail “could scare them to death,” but a moment later she confesses, “or not at all . . . because it is no better outside” (Body’s Place 86). If the hospital is a place to die for those on the inside that “removes any urge to die” for those on the outside, it is a place of death that has an autoimmune effect of saving or protecting life. Both places are on the same island, so the autoimmune paradox is similar to the effect that Marie-Pierre’s murder ultimately has on Hélène. The autoimmune paradox emerges when Hélène compares the island to a body: “As for the island, she can only sense its presence: a great body always hidden in the darkness. A familiar body. Foreign. Which one only thinks about” (Body’s Place 107). The word “familiar” derives from the Latin, which means “belonging to a household, private, personal, of or belonging to a family, closely associated, intimately connected, well-known, habitual, customary” (*OED*). Consciously or not, Hélène must think of the body, including her own, within the context of the family as something she knows intimately, and well. The “great body” of the island of mercy, however, is also “always hidden in darkness . . . Foreign.” Like the hospital and the jail, the great body is not a unitary, homogenous, body, but internally divided, where the immune system is not a set of simple opposites maintaining a boundary between an invulnerable self and the other as

foreign invader. The differences are now internal to the body, and the autoimmune body regulates the exchange between these antagonistic forces in order to survive.

In keeping with the island surrounded by water, Hélène finds herself after Lisa's death on "A shipwreck with survivors" (Body's Place 149). The shipwreck also symbolizes her family. In contrast with Lisa, Hélène survives her autoimmune illness, or she is saved by welcoming the otherness of death, the figure of Marie-Pierre Sauvé, within herself. The surname "Sauvé," if one gives it the meaning of the adjective, "*sauvé*," can be translated many ways, ranging from words like "relieved," "freed," "protected," and "liberated," to "rescued," or "saved." Hélène's mother wants Hélène, and Lisa, to be "safe" from danger, but in order to "save" her daughters, Hélène's mother feels she must instill in them a state of constant vigilance and absolute fear of the world. The first family law presumes to protect Hélène by teaching her to defend herself "in all circumstances," which would require an absolutely closed relationship within the safety of the family, and her house. However, the second law of the family that drives the children outside the family is necessary because as her mother has just said, using the "perfect conditional [...] outside [the family] we aren't safe from anything," so all family members must act "as if they [the murderers] are [already] here" in the house, or in the family. According to Hélène's mother, then, the family can only protect its members, or make them safe, if they act as though the family is already invaded by what destroys them, or through autoimmune indemnification. The best way to make sense of this contradiction is to accept the family as divided from itself, or accept the difference(s) within itself. Each member of the family must accept this autoimmune protection as a way to prevent the family from being absolutely closed to the outside, and inoculate itself from what is trying to kill it by letting a little of the threat into the family system, and act "as if" the threat of death were imminent. Acting as if the threat is here, in the family system right now,

forces the family to open itself to otherness, to protect risk in order to conserve and sustain the promise of a future, for better or for worse. Since absolute closure not only blinds the family to the external forces trying to destroy it, but also prevents each member of the family from inventing their own new ways to adapt to the outside, only the paradoxical form of protection provided by autoimmunity can satisfy the antinomy, the two contradictory laws, of the family.

Like all survivors, Hélène's survival of her autoimmune illness means that she must guard herself, and guard against herself. Surviving the mourning of Marie-Pierre Sauvé, and the death of her sister, depends upon Hélène's ability to open herself to the other, including the infection and contamination of death. Hélène still fears death within life, but instead of trying to purify her mortal body by sacrificing it as her sister Lisa does, she incorporates the other of life into herself. Rather than trying to expel the impurity, like the scapegoat at the "very heart of the inside," whether the impurity is inside herself or the family, Hélène affirms her vulnerability to the impurity at the very heart of the inside. The vulnerability at the heart of the inside, of course, is also Lisa, who prompts Hélène's thought: "If I'd done it, she thinks, I'd have chosen blood. / But she has stayed behind in the world. Alive" (*Body's Place* 151). Living with the two laws of the family means she can never escape the oppositions between protection and vulnerability, poison and medicine, life and death, which will, like the murdered ghost, her other self, Marie-Pierre Sauvé—and now Lisa—keep coming back to haunt her.

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