

# The Figure of the Imaginary Father in the Autobiographical Writing of M. Yourcenar

## Abstract

In the present paper I read Marguerite Yourcenar's autobiographical trilogy *Le labyrinthe du monde* through Kristeva's concept of the imaginary father. My interpretation aims to trace the way the androgynous figure of the imaginary father acts in a liberatory way and also stimulates Yourcenar's own work. The retroactive invention of an imaginary origin is associated with the figure of a loving father. Yourcenar traces her genealogy – on the one hand, she identifies with her familial lineage; on the other, she claims that the composition of her ancestry relates much more to her literary precursors and her fictional characters. Yourcenar's identification appears not on the side of matricide and the powers of horror, but exactly the opposite – on the side of the imaginary father and creative potential.

## Keywords

*Yourcenar, imaginary father, primary identification, imaginary relations, matricide*

In early Kristeva, but also in her later works right up to the Colette book, the figure of the mother is an important conceptual persona. It is in relation to this tendency that the concept of the *imaginary father* is established. The imaginary father is a wholly positive figure in the dynamics of primary identification. He is an imaginary instance in Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, first introduced in *Tales of Love* (1983) and subsequently developed in books such as *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (1985), *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy* (1987) and *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (1996).

If the mother figure is connected to pre-Oedipal dynamics, the father figure traditionally evokes the symbolic father of the Oedipal constellation. Kristeva's novelty is to shed light on an earlier father figure, already established in the pre-Oedipal phase. If we refer

to Lacan's terms of the *symbolic*, the *imaginary*, and the *real*, this figure is not the symbolic father, but his predecessor in the order of the imaginary. The symbolic father signifies language, law, and representation. His role is decisive. The symbolic father provides stability for the child, draws its boundaries, and endows it with the ability to recognize differences. Although Kristeva explores the important place of the symbolic father, she nevertheless introduces this earlier father figure. From her perspective, the true source of creativity, renewal, and self-transformation is this imaginary father.

Kristeva elaborates the idea of an imaginary father within a constellation of concepts in *Tales of Love*. This figure is related to primary identification (*Einführung*), which is accomplished either through direct transference or by a sudden metaphoric leap. "Simultaneously, what one can only call the *absolute* existence of *transference* is established, a transference laden with libido [...] [which] works in the direction of a complex, composite, and, in short, imaginary realm ('the father in individual prehistory')" (Kristeva 1987, 27). This primary identification is an immediate objectless sensuous identification, one that involves passion, gesture, and sound. The imaginary father is a heterogeneous conglomerate of *mother-and-father* (Kristeva 1987, 40). The transference she/he performs moves from incorporation to sublimation and this process therefore liberates the very possibility of language. Thus, the sublimatory illumination or creative potential rests on the figure of the imaginary father.

Miglena Nikolchina's reading of Virginia Woolf develops precisely this theoretical perspective operative in Kristeva, outlining the figure of the imaginary father as a playful and sublimating modality. Nikolchina draws particular attention to its creative potential, which guarantees every metaphorical breakthrough, or the translation of female libido into love: "As a heterogenous translation, as a transposition that metaphorically relays the subject via an immediate leap to the place of the mother's desire, this idealizing movement originates in the most archaic of settings. Transforming the lost mother into an imaginary father" (Nikolchina 2004, 38). The trajectory of this departure from the lost maternal continent (the trajectory of meaning) is elaborated in *Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf* via the modality of the playful, the carnivalesque, the sublimatory, and creative potential generally. The present reading of Yourcenar's autobiographical writing is based on the theoretical formulations

proposed by Nikolchina and Kristeva. The emphasis in this reading is the fragile boundary that arises from the figure of the imaginary father.

Yourcenar pays close attention to her background in her autobiographical trilogy *Le Labyrinthe du monde* (1974–1984). Yourcenar almost entirely omits her own personal story; she is present as a narrating voice, commenting to illuminate her roots. By turning to the history of her ancestors, she aims to comprehend her own composition, the complex entanglement of faces and texts that precede her.

Yourcenar chooses to begin her memoir with the genealogy of her mother's line. A question persists through the three volumes: are kinship and family relations stronger and more real than the imaginary relations in the worlds of literature, art, and our own fantasy? Her unremembered mother and her father's line barely fit into her childhood individual story. Imaginary identification is made necessary by the fact that, as Yourcenar says, "it is not blood and sperm alone that make us what we are" (Yourcenar 1992, 45). She often alludes to being more closely related to fictional or historical persons than the families she actually came from. For instance, she says that Baudelaire and John of Austria's mother form a greater part of her past than her maternal grandparents. Yourcenar also entangles the fictional with the genealogical. She does not simply invent imaginary origins, but narrates some of her parents' travelogues, juxtaposing them with those of Gustav von Aschenbach, Tonio Kröger, Hedda Gabler, Jörgen Tesman, etc.

Yourcenar invokes Marcel Proust as her imaginary father, figuring her own father as Proust's hero. One episode at the very end of *Souvenirs pieux* (1974) sheds light on the fusion of Proust and her father, Michel de C, and involves co-creation between daughter and father. At the end of Michel's life, Yourcenar was working on her novel about Alexis, occasionally reading parts of the manuscript to her father. In response, he decided to reveal to an old manuscript of his own – the beginning of a novel. The sight of her father's writing evokes Proust: "my father pulled from a drawer a dozen pages of manuscript, wider than they were long, like the paper which Proust used for his rough drafts" (Yourcenar 1992, 315). Yourcenar is not comparing her father's work to Proust's. Instead, she notes the contextual affinity of two people who have no relation to each other.

In Yourcenar's fantasy, if her mother and father (Fernande and Michel) had traveled to Venice, they might have met Thomas Mann's protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach. This blending of fictional and real characters is possible precisely to the extent that they are embedded in a common texture, along the traces of *lost time*, recoverable by the imagination through feeling, smell, taste. In the intimate exchange between father and daughter, Michel thought to give his pages to Yourcenar, who was taking her first steps as a writer, so she could publish them in her own behalf. Together they edited the manuscript, composing a shared narrative which they entitled "The First Evening" (Yourcenar 1992, 317). This is the story of Georges's wedding night, as he takes his first uncertain steps into marriage. It was published after Michel's death. However, the father was inscribed in the story precisely as a creative impulse, a dream, a sensuous element, or as an imaginative force. In *Dreams and Destinies*, her dream diary, Yourcenar says that a whole territory of her inner life lies in the possession of her father figure (Yourcenar 1999, 1).

Yourcenar's autobiographical episode offers a good illustration of Kristeva's theory of the imaginary father figure. In this striking incestuous story, we clearly see the workings of the mechanism of incorporation and sublimation. The daughter absorbed the father's pages and created a new work from them. A psychoanalytic interpretation would not omit the incestuous element, as the first collaboration between father and daughter actually tells the story of a wedding night. The daughter was admitted as an editor and witness. Yourcenar comments that the narrative had no documentary basis. Its verisimilitude, however, derives not from the content but from its sensuous atmosphere.

Another act of collaboration between daughter and father can be found in the French title of the first volume of the trilogy, *Souvenirs pieux* (translated as *Dear Departed* in English), which resurrects the mother's line. The "small religious card" (Yourcenar 1992, 48) bearing prayers was part of Catholic custom. Yet it included an unattributed memorial for Yourcenar's mother, Fernande, which she believes was written by her father: a modest and touching gesture. Yourcenar takes her father's pious memory of her dead mother, and unfolds it in the same modest and touching style in *Souvenirs pieux*. The entire portrait of her mother is based on the two phrases written by her father: "We should not weep because she is no more; we should smile because

she existed. She always tried to do her best” (Yourcenar 1992, 49). Yourcenar ironically comments on the memorial her father had left for her mother, which seems to find it necessary to mask the banality of her life.

Yourcenar tries to draw the outline her mother’s life as if she hadn’t prematurely passed away. In a parallel possibility of life, one in which Fernande did not die, the daughter asks herself if there would be space for love to occur between them. The answer is in the negative. She foretells the future of their mother-daughter relationship: her childlike affection would most probably degenerate into a mixture of aggression and indifference. The evidence is that this happens often. The same author whose antiquarian fascination led her, in *Le labyrinthe du monde*, to gather the fragments of an unrecorded past by visiting various institutions, collecting all sorts of objects and records connected to her distant relatives, in order to tell about them, passionately and systematically destroyed everything left by her mother. Fernande’s chest of is opened and every one of her belongings is removed and examined (Yourcenar 1992, 54–57). This is the very drive to matricide whose obscure territory Kristeva and Nikolchina cross in theory. The images of her mother’s life present her as silent, helpless, without the strength to live, as always already a corpse. Yourcenar may fail to embody the image of her mother very vividly, but it is more important that she transforms her affect into language.

Leakthina C. Ollier interprets *Souvenirs pieux* using the theoretical framework of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, drawing on matricide as the key topos. Ollier sees it as ironic that the public announcement of the daughter’s birth coincides with the announcement of the mother’s death. Ollier stresses Yourcenar’s inability to move beyond the encompassing symbiosis of mother and daughter. She focuses on Yourcenar’s desire to portray her relationship with her mother in an inverted dynamic – the daughter’s writing gives birth and feeds the mother with a story (Ollier 1999, 87–99). Ollier, however, completely ignores the figure of the imaginary father, who paves the way to writing and transforms the dead mother into a metaphorical father. And that is the first step towards the art of resurrecting historical or fictional persons.

Yourcenar does not scruple to admit: “I take issue with the assertion, commonly heard, that the premature death of a mother is always a disaster or that a child deprived of its mother feels a lifelong sense of loss and a yearning for the deceased. In any case, at least, things turned

otherwise” (Yourcenar 1992, 52).<sup>1</sup> Her fascination with the creative rather than the biological is anchored in the figure of the imaginary father. It is this instance that quite literally rescues the writer from the deadly mother-daughter grasp.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> In the original French: “Je m’inscris en faux contre l’assertion, souvent entendue, que la perte prématurée d’une mère est toujours un désastre, ou qu’un enfant privé de la sienne éprouve toute sa vie le sentiment d’un manque et la nostalgie de l’absente” (Yourcenar 1974, 55).