Authority and Authorship in the Works of Marie Nimier: *"Points de re-père"*

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The publication of Marie Nimier's latest work, *La Reine du Silence* (2004), prompted something of a critical consensus, a common interpretation of her work typified by a short review of the text which states that "[I]l aura fallu que Marie Nimier écrive huit romans pour affronter enfin l'image paternelle."[1] At last, we learn, the author has turned to a subject that she had hitherto avoided. *La Reine du Silence*, it is suggested, marks a break from Nimier's previous writing. The text of *La Reine du Silence* itself, however, provides us with a different interpretive gloss—one which emphasis continuity over rupture—as the author-narrator suggests that her whole corpus might be read as "une longue phrase qui raconterait l'histoire de l'émergenee d'un corps, de sa réunification" (145). Whilst it can be stated with some confidence that the first statement is misleading to the extent than an (if not *the*) "image paternelle" had in fact been confronted in Nimier's corpus long before the publication of *La Reine du Silence*, the second statement must be approached with a degree of circumspection. To take it at face value would mean reading *La Reine du Silence* as an autobiographical text; it would amount to equating the first-person narrator Marie Nimier with the author of the same name, then accepting the latter's interpretation of her own work. Whilst this is certainly a valid approaeh, some readers may still hesitate. After all, Nimier's entire corpus plays with the boundaries of genre and refcrentiality, engaging in word-play and self-reflexive moments, moving between mimesis and semiosis, introdueing us to narrators who are also writers. This caveat notwithstanding, the following diseussion aims to unpick and link the above two statements relating to *La Reine du Silence* by suggesting firstly that eontrary to the critical perception, the eight texts whieh preceded Nimier's latest work—namely *Sirène*, *La Girafe*, *Anatomie d'un chœur*, *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous*, *La Caresse*, *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau*, *Domino* and finally *La Nouvelle Pornographie*—ean indeed be seen

to represent an engagement with the "image paternelle" in various modulations, and secondly, that this confrontation with the paternal is in fact the key to the "émergence d'un corps, sa réunification" alluded to in the text of *La Reine du Silence*.

Since space does not permit an analysis of all of the complexities of the familial configurations which are central to Nimier's corpus (one could, for example, discuss recurring triangular oedipal formations, or modulations in the representation of the maternal figure), the following discussion is restricted to the paternal figure and his various avatars. In his "Family Romances" Freud outlines some of the fantasies which children may play out in their attempts to escape from the authority of parents who, due to various factors (such as sibling rivalry, a lack of—or perceived lack of–parental love, etc.), have come to be seen in an increasingly critical light by their offspring. Such expressions of dissatisfaction with paternal figures occur throughout the Nimier corpus. Cora, first-person narrator of *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous*, Mikis, first-person narrator of *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau*, Noé, a character on the threshold of adulthood in *Anatomie d'un chœur*, and even Gilda, the young pug dog who narrates *La Caresse*, for instance, all bemoan their respective fathers' (or in Gilda's case, owner's) uninspiring jobs and temperaments, the various paternal figures' emotional frigidity and the mutual indifference which seems to characterise the relationship between fathers and their charges. All are perceived as inadequate paternal figures from whose authority the characters and narrators ultimately escape in the course of the novels. Paternal figures are, furthermore, repeatedly associated with their descendants' failures to live up to expectations. We are informed, for instance, that choir-master Thomas, the central protagonist of *Anatomie d'un chœur*, "se sentait vieux et impuissant" at the age of fourteen, unable to master the piano as did his famous ancestor Charles-Valentin-Morhange (41), and that Joseph, narrator of *La Girafe*, suffers from a "souci permanent de la justification" (186) in the face of his father. Dissatisfaction and unease extends in some cases to more extreme fantasies: Joseph confesses to an "envie inavouable de voir la tête de [s]on père s'enfoncer doucement

dans l'eau froide de la baignoire" (42); the narrator of *Sirène* performs what is described as a form of "parricide" when she notes on school record forms that her father, thought to be missing in the Algerian conflict, is dead (130). Finally, the theme of disputed paternity (central to Freud's "Family Romances") can be identified in several texts: in *Anatomie d'un chœur*, where it is suggested that the character Nouche's baby, Valentin, could be Thomas's, Jean's or Médard's; in *Domino*, where doubts are expressed as to whether Silvio or Boris fathers Tom; and in *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous*, in which it is hinted that the narrator Cora may be her uncle Paul's daughter.

The "Family Romance," Freud observes, is a highly flexible system of compensatory fantasy. As he states: "if there are any other particular interests at work they can direct the course to be taken by the family romance; for its many-sidedness and its great range of applicability enable it to meet every sort of requirement" (Freud 77). In the case of the Nimier corpus we find an important variation on the general theme of paternal dysfunction in the form of the recurring motif of the absent father. This motif, central to *Sirène*, is also adumbrated in, for instance, *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, in which the narrator's discovery that her former school-friend and single-parent-to-be Valérie Toss is expecting a baby prompts the observation that "au fond de moi-même je plains l'enfant qui toute sa vie cherchera son père," with the added acknowledgment that such a stance reflects a projection of the narrator's "destin personnel" (142). Tying in to the motif of the dysfunctional or absent father is a further, key, recurring theme: that of the replacement father or *point de re-père*: the lover who stands in for the absent father.

Repeated several times in the corpus this pattern can be identified in the character Bruno, lover of Marine, the protagonist of *Sirène*. The link between lover and father is first hinted at when Marine lies in hospital recovering from a suicide attempt and Bruno hastens to correct the spelling of her patronym or "nom du père" written on a clipboard: "Bruno [. . .] trace un K maladroit sur le Q et le U, transforme le E en A et le T en Y [. . .] raye le tout et inscrit en dépassant légèrement sur

la courbe de température un Kerbay minuscule" (35). Should the reader fail to identify this potentially telling sign, and fail equally to register the fact that the protagonist addresses both her father and lover as "vous," Bruno's status as a replacement paternal figure is made explicit in a typical gesture of auto-analysis when we are informed that: "Bruno sera ce point de re-père autour duquel Marine tournera, acceptant de se taire, de s'effacer plutôt que de perdre encore une fois l'être indispensable, l'homme aimé" 130). In the light of *La Reine du Silence*, in which Nimier not only reminds her readers that her father died in his Aston Martin sports car, but that "mon père buvait beaucoup" (58), we might note that Bruno, who abandons Marine for another woman, is prone to both "excès de boisson" and "de vitesse" (81). A similar pattern of paternal replacement and the re-enactment of childhood patterns can be identified in other texts. In *Domino*, Silvio, lover of the eponymous narrator, is explicitly linked to the latter's attempt to break from the father—"je prenais le contre-pied des dispositions paternelle," Domino informs us of her liaison (57)—but Silvio is tellingly described as having a "ton paternel" (26), and by the close of the text his potential involvement alongside his own father in the manslaughter of his sister, Catherine, is never elucidated. In *Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* Cora has three lovers all of whom serve as *points de re-père*: school-teacher Léo, a rare positive figure who symbolises temporary refuge; Cora's uncle Paul (who, like Bruno, abandons Cora for another woman); and the malign hypnotist Katz, another heavy drinker characterised by a "besoin incessant de séduire" (237). Finally *La Nouvelle Pornographie* introduces the reader to Gabriel Tournon, a literary adviser at a major publishing house—as, of course, was Roger Nimier—who first appears at the close of *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* in an apparently positive guise, only to reappear in the later text as controlling figure who ultimately abandons the narrator, Marie Nimier, for her best friend Aline.

Such examples of paternal dysfunction can be read productively not only in the light of Freud's "Family Romances," but alongside *La Reine du Silence*, which, it can be suggested, both provides an

interpretive grid for our reading of the rest of the Nimier corpus and represents a logical end-point, or at least movement towards resolution, with respect to the familial issues raised in the rest of the corpus. In his "Family Romances" Freud suggests that the compensatory fantasies of the child may be linked to the creative temperament: "For quite a specific form of imaginative activity is one of the essential characteristics of neurotics and also of all comparatively highly gifted people" (Freud 75). Interestingly, Nimier herself has suggested that the novel constitutes a "lieu privilégié de l'imaginaire" ("Marie Nimier répond à vos questions"). It is, she further states in *La Reine du Silence*, "une forme généreuse à ceux pour qui vivre ne va pas de soi" (50). Looking at the eight texts which precede *La Reine du Silence*, we can suggest that at the level of the *diegesis*, the substitution of the missing or dysfunctional father with *points de re-père* can be read as cases of acting out: the (usually female) protagonists and narrators compulsively repeat the dysfunctional paternal scenarios with ill-chosen lovers. At another level, however, it could be suggested that through the very process of staging these familial patterns in fictional form, via her exploitation of the "forme généreuse" which is the novel, Nimier is carrying out a process of working through, a conscious *mise en scène* of paternal dysfunction which finds its natural endpoint in *La Reine du Silence*.

La Reine du Silence, which, as an autobiographical (or autofictional?) work, finally removes the screen of fiction and stages the familial conflicts surrounding not just *a* father figure or "image paternelle" but *the* problematic father—Roger Nimier—thus seems to mark a certain resolution in the Nimier imaginary, but how might it constitute an interpretive grid for our reading of the rest of the corpus? Bearing in mind one of the founding factors of the "Family Romance"—Freud's notion that a child may feel slighted by a parental figure (Freud 75)—we can identify a seminal moment in *La Reine du Silence* in which a young Marie Nimier offers her father a meal of a plastic fried egg and peas as he sits working at his desk. Nimier senior's response to his daughter's offering—a dismissive, and reiterated "-Quoi encore!" (60)—elicits the following retrospective reflection:

> Pourquoi ne faisait-il pas semblant de manger? C'est comme ça dans les squares, quand on confectionne sur un rebord en béton des gratins d'herbe et de mégots, et de même sur la plage, les adultes se doivent de goûter nos préparations. C'est dans le contrat familial, comme les conversations avec les animaux en peluche ou la lecture avant de s'endormir. Sans doute mon père n'avait-il pas été mis au courant. (60)

When she returns later to her father's study Marie discovers that he has gone. The plate bearing the meal lies in the bin; the fried egg sits on the desk, cratered by a stubbed-out cigarette. The wound inflicted is underscored shortly after when the author notes with laconic understatement that "J'ai appris récemment que mon père fumait très peu" (61).

Dissatisfaction with the banality of parental jobs and temperaments in the rest of the corpus also takes on new significance when read in the light of *La Reine du Silence*, in which we see Marie Nimier pondering what her life might have been had her father not been who he was: "Et si je n'étais pas la fille de Roger Nimier? Si j'étais, je ne sais pas, moi, la fille de ce champion du saut à la perche que l'on voyait s'envoler à la une de *L'Equipe*?" (40-1). The origins of the missing fathers of the fictional works can similarly be traced to Nimier's latest text, in which we are reminded not only that Roger Nimier died when his daughter was only five years old, but that his high-profile status as a public figure meant that he was in some respects "missing" as a father; relegated to a "papa" in the form of "deux négations collées" (*La Reine* 55); a "père fantôme" (37). Finally, and perhaps most significantly for what follows, *La Reine du Silence* provides us with a bridge between the figure of the absent father and the writing act. As she reflects upon her elder brother Martin's career as an "anesthésiste réanimateur," the author describes her sibling as "celui qui, au fond de lui-même, espère toujours que son papa reviendra" (36). She adds: "J'ai l'impression que nous exerçons le même métier sous des formes différentes" (37). As the rest of this discussion will suggest, the figure of *authority*, the literal biological father, is intimately associated in the Nimier imaginary

with *authorship*; more specifically, with the fictional protagonists' and narrators' relationship to the creative act.

The fact that paternal figures dominate the Nimier corpus should no longer be in doubt, but how precisely are these fictional fathers and/or their replacements or *points de re-père* linked to "l'émergence d'un corps" and to the "réunification" of that "corps" cited in the introduction above? In what follows it will be suggested that the corpus reveals how paternal figures precipitate a splitting process in protagonists and narrators, and that, divided between silence and voice, the latter can achieve unity only when and if they overcome the imposed silence and find a new voice in the form of authorship; when they become creators in their own right and name. The "corps" which emerges can thus be considered not only as that of the united subject, but also that of the artistic corpus they themselves produce.

A seminal moment of splitting or dis-unification can be traced back to what is, with the exception of *La Reine du Silence*, Nimier's most autobiographical text: *Sirène*. When Marine meets up with her father after many years—a father whom her mother had led her to believe was missing in the Algerian conflict—he makes her promise never to mention his reappearance, this paternal prohibition or "non du père" precipitating a debilitating splitting: "faute de pouvoir partager elle se partage, Marine ou le plaisir enfantin de garder, Line ou la peur de se trahir..." (167). The splitting caused by the "non" of prohibition is, it should be noted, further reflected in the "nom" or name of the protagonist: Marine Céline Rosalie Kerbay. The name "Marine" was chosen by her father, whilst her mother, who had opted for "Line," finally settled on the name "Céline," homonym for "c'est Line." Marine's lover's mother, we might also note, can never recall if her son's partner is named "Marie" or "Martine" (41), and indeed the name Marine seems to comprise a conflation of the names Marie and Céline. The protagonist's other nickname is also revealing of the splitting between silence and voice: dubbed "la sirène" by her mother because of her loud voice reminiscent of a fire-engine siren, Marine also comes to embody the silenced figure of the siren in Andersen's tale.[4]

This foundational splitting between voice and silence precipitated by paternal prohibition is thereafter acted out in the corpus by various paternal figures or/and those *points de re-père* already identified. Marine's lover Bruno is thus repeatedly associated with his refusal to let Marine speak; with his imposition of silence: "elle avait essayé de partager avec Bruno l'impartageable [. . .] chaque fois il lui avait coupé la parole" (12). Bruno's casual betrayal of his partner when he sells a sculpture he had promised to give her, leaves her "sans voix" (13); we are told that "un mur de silence" threatens the relationship (80). More importantly, silence represents not only a refusal to let Marine speak; it also means thwarting her creative talent. Bruno belittles Marine's career as an actress, pointing out that whilst she merely follows the instructions of her director, his sculpting is an act of true creativity: "Lui, l'Artiste, le créateur et elle, l'interprète, comme il se plaisait à le répéter" (89). Although both *La Girafe* and *Anatomie d'un chœur* feature male protagonists, the latter are also subject to paternal influence over the creative act, and both texts represent tensions between what can be identified as the figure of the "Artiste" and that of the "interprète." In *La Girafe*, in which silence appears to be projected upon and embodied in the eponymous girafe, Joseph (named by his mother) whose struggle with paternal authority has already been noted in the context of the "Family Romance," discovers that his own creative act has been appropriated by his father who edits and types up the letters Joseph writes home and attempts to sell them to various publishers.[3] Thomas Morhange, choirmaster of *Anatomie d'un chœur*, is similarly involved not only in the literal case of disputed paternity noted above (is Valentin his son?) but with the metaphorical paternity of the musical score his choir is working on. Although Thomas passes this work off as that of his paternal great-grandfather Alkan (Charles-Valentin-Morhange), he has, in fact, himself composed the musical score from a chaotic original which consisted of little more than "quelques notes abandonnées sur la première page d'un cahier vide" (94).[4] As befits a text whose title plays on the homonym "chœur/cœur," resolution is achieved at both a literal and a metaphorical level in the person of Thomas's lover Nouche, with

whom the choir-master finds personal happiness, and who, significantly, leads him to assume the creative act in his own name: "Il ne devait rien à personne, ni à ses parents ni à son aïeul" (85). Thomas is finally acknowledged as the "father" of the work he had claimed merely to be interpreting: "les musicologues lui attribuèrent aussitôt *la paternité* de l'œuvre" (236, my emphasis).

Whereas Nimier's male protagonists and narrators may find some form of resolution via their relationship with a female figure (like *Anatomie d'un chœur*, *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau* comes to a conclusion with the male first-person narrator Mikis settled with a young family and writing his own story), for female figures faced with problems of authority and authorship, resolution may be harder to find. Both *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* and *Domino* stage similar struggles to preceding texts whilst developing certain key themes, namely fantasised guilt and retribution and the adoption of a pseudonym. Cora, first-person narrator of *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous*, is coerced into silence via two paternal substitutes, her uncle Paul, with whom she has a brief affair, and the hypnotist Katz: "Mon onele passe et repasse ses doigts sur mes lèvres, se taire, se taire, toujours Katz répète les mêmes mots" (137). Like Bruno, and indeed like Thomas himself, whose struggle over the assumption of authorship is largely an internal one, Katz is displeased when Cora strays from her role as assistant ("interprète") and begins to carry out public acts of hypnotism during his show: "Il était clair que ma façon d'empiéter sur son territoire lui avait fortement déplu" (228). The next line of the text mentions the heavy scarring on Cora's hands (as part of his act Katz burns her with cigarettes whilst she is under hypnosis), thereby hinting at fantasised guilt: the father figure exacts retribution when the narrator seeks the status of artist in her own right. This notion of fantasised punishment is taken a step further in *Domino* via the character Catherine. Already an author of several novels, when Catherine decides to publish an autobiographical piece which reveals the family's secrets (the link with Nimier is self-evident), she faces the ultimate act of paternal silencing, dying at the hands of her own father. As we are reminded, Catherine's

parents had provided her with financial support on only one condition: "qu'elle se taise" (196). Once more, *La Reine du Silence* provides an insight into these two texts, for Nimier notes that writers whose fathers die when their offspring are young may write to fill the void of loss, but may equally fall silent "pour se faire pardonner pour avoir volé la parole paternelle" (48). And where *La Reine du Silence* also reveals that Nimier had never considered writing under a pseudonym—"J'aurais toujours eu l'impression d'avancer masquée, déguisée, d'utiliser un subterfuge pour m'accorder le droit d'écrire," (83)—her female fictional characters do not reach such resolution: Catherine's journal is published posthumously under Domino's name, whilst Cora ends up working as "Rose" in the Lolita phone-sex agency, though she does take a positive step forward when she begins to read out her own story to her bemused customers, finally achieving the status of artist, albeit an anonymous one.

Nimier's penultimate text, *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, can be seen to signal a distinct move towards resolution. For the first time another crucial split—that between author and narrator—is partially overcome as Nimier moves from the genre of the novel to that of autofiction. Although the text is clearly designated a "roman" on its front cover, its narrator is one Marie Nimier, born, we are informed, in the same place as the author, and writing a book for editor Gabriel which has a pale pink cover (the Gallimard trademark) due to be published in the year 2000 under the title *La Nouvelle Pornographie*. For the first time, as Nimier has stated in an interview, she is writing "en [mon] propre nom [. . .] sans pour autant que ce travail soit autobiographique," ("Marie Nimier répond à vos questions") thereby abolishing what is described in the text as "une distance" between her "corps" and "[ces] mots" (*La Nouvelle Pornographie* 103). As the author-narrator adds: "je me mouillais [. . .] je prenais sur moi" (107). Although this hybrid genre still represents a *point de re-père* in the form of Gabriel; although, in other words, the psychic drama is still being played out at one remove, it also, perhaps significantly, includes references to the author-narrator's "real" father, the anguished statement on the penultimate page—"J'attends mon père"

(181)—paving the way to the open discussion of the author's relations with her father in *La Reine du Silence*.

Finally, as befits a corpus in which the writing act is constantly brought to our reflective attention by semiotic play and by the representation of characters or narrators who are themselves involved in the creative process, it should be noted that the link between the paternal figure, silence and the creative act in Nimier's novels extends beyond the representation of the relationship between narrators/protagonists and the various *points de re-père*: it is also inscribed via various intratextual motifs which recur throughout the corpus, for instance, to select just one of several examples, the figure of ellipsis—symbol of silence *par excellence*. When Marine in *Sirène* writes a suicide note, her self-imposed writing rules are described as follows: "ne pas faire de ratures, ne pas lever la plume, éviter les points de suspension—espérant ainsi dépasser la méfiance que lui inspiraient les mots" (12). Ellipsis is subsequently linked to the figure of the father, whose evasive answers in the face of his daughter's questions about his protracted absence are marked by repeated telling silences: "Que cachait-il derrière ses points de suspension?" (145); "De nouveau ces maudits points de suspension" (162).[5] In *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous*, when the manipulative paternal figure Katz writes to Cora about his plans to take her on as his assistant, his letter is literally punctuated with "de nombreux points d'exclamation et de suspension" (161). Finally, in *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, Gabriel voices his objections to the narrator's use of ellipsis in the stories she writes—stories which, by failing to fulfil the writing brief he has given her and opting instead to explore and express her own views, establish her as creator rather than mere interpreter: "Gabriel Tournon [. . .] développe une aversion pour les points de suspension; mes parenthèses évidées lui donnent, dit-il, la chair de poule" (119).[6]

If ellipsis comes to stand for paternal silencing, then another recurring intratextual motif takes on an equally symbolic value: the paternal *bibliothèque*. In *Anatomie d'un chœur* we learn that it is the vision of his ancestor, Alkan, "gisant sous un monceau de livres"

(Alkan dies when his book-shelves collapse upon him) which inspires Thomas to take up his work (94). In *Domino*, Catherine, the ill-fated novelist and would-be writer of an autobiographical text who dies at the hands of her father claims that the bruises and injuries she sports result from her own book-shelves toppling onto her (143). In *La Nouvelle Pornographie* the narrator recounts how during a childhood illness she would fall asleep "en contemplant la bibliothèque de mon père," adding that had she died at that moment this would have been a fitting last image to take her father from the world of the living (47). Finally, in *La Reine du Silence*, Marie Nimier records her sense of guilt as she gazed at her father's book-shelves as a young child: "il y avait pour moi quelque chose de l'ordre de la transgression dans le seul fait d'en déchiffrer les titres" (99).

The paternal *bibliothèque* clearly represents the ambivalent status of the creative paternal heritage, which is both a crushing, inhibiting force and a source of potential inspiration. *La Reine du Silence* also links this paternal heritage to another key concept: that of "l'exécutrice." The author of *La Reine du Silence* points out that Roger Nimier willed his books to friends and to her brother Martin: "Et moi, bernique" (40). Semiotic play allows us to link the word "exécuter" back to the notion of silence and creativity. When the author of *La Reine du Silence* discovers a note written by her father announcing the birth of his daughter with the words "J'ai été immédiatement la noyer dans la Seine pour ne plus en entendre parler" (121), she reflects that her attempted suicide could be interpreted as a means of executing her father's will: "comme si j'avais voulu, vingt-cinq années plus tard, *mettre à exécution* les mots de mon père" (122, my emphasis). Resolution in the face of paternal dismissal and silencing, however, can, as we have seen, also be achieved by other, more positive means: creating in one's own right and name. After all, from being "*l'exécuteur* passif et aveugle du testament inachevé de son ancêtre" (*Anatomie* 99, my emphasis), Thomas, becomes a composer who exeeutes his own will and creativity. And as has been argued here, Nimier herself, thanks to the "generous" form that is the novel, appears to have used the representational staging of ambivalent fictional paternal

figures and the tensions between authority and authorship which the "image paternelle" precipitates to exorcise her own demons, executing her own works of art, and thereby producing a reunified "corps" which is both her own subjectivity and her literary corpus.

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NOTES

[1] See also Michèle Gazier, "Le père fantôme"; Marianne Payot, "Le nom du père" ("Marie aura attendu une moitié de vie avant d'affronter Roger, son père"); Daniel Morvan, "Marie Nimier: la reine du silence parle" ("Marie Nimier aura écrit huit romans avant d'oser affronter la figure paternelle").

[2] For further discussion of the figure of the siren see my "Hard Core, Hard Sell: Marie Nimier's *La Nouvelle Pornographie*," (28-37). The polyvalent "sirène" recurs throughout the Nimier corpus, for example in *La Nouvelle Pornographie* as a fire-engine siren (17) and cigarette lighter in the form of siren (mermaid) (177-8) and as an inflatable plastic siren in *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* (190).

[3] The link between splitting, silence and the girafe is made in *La Reine du Silence*: "la solution la plus simple n'était-elle pas de se partager en deux, comme la sirène? D'être à la fois femme et poisson? Celle qui chante et celle qui se tait? Le poisson est muet, et telle est la girafe qui deviendrait le personnage principal de mon deuxième roman" (145).

[4] The link between authority and voice is also played out in the same text between the character Noé and his father, Jean. Noé, who like the child in Freud's "Family Romances," wishes his father were quite simply not his father ("il lui reprochait d'être son père" (77), is in no hurry to join Jean amidst the bass singers in the choir when his voice breaks: "Il ne supportait pas l'idée que sa voix puisse se confondre avec la sienne [his father's]" (108).

[5] In *La Girafe*, when Joseph is questioned about the liaison between the zoo's director and the "caissière," he first remains silent before offering an apparently half-hearted acknowledgment of the relationship: "'Je

ne vois pas vraiment d'autre explication…' [. . .] Je laissai honteusement traîner les points de suspension" (68). In this case the unspoken form part of a recurring pattern whereby Joseph, in an apparently oedipal gesture, seeks repeatedly to break up couple (including the unlikely alliance between the eponymous giraffe and an ostrich…).

[6] The significance of another recurring motif, that of parentheses, might also be noted. *Celui qui court derrière l'oiseau*, for instance, opens with the statement "Je déteste les parenthèses" (11), and closes with the claim that "Je prends un certain plaisir à me mettre entre parenthèses. J'ai appris à aimer ces signes qui protègent les pensées fragiles" (295). In *La Nouvelle Pornographie* the narrator contemplates the desire of certain men to wear restrictive s-m masks which obstruct their mouths (the theme of silencing again): "je comprends ce désir de se mettre entre parenthèses, ce besoin d'être contraint pour se dépasser" (162). *La Reine du Silence* offers us a possible interpretive route (which cannot be developed here) when we learn first that Nimier's mother had initially sought to protect her children from news of their father's death: "Elle nous avaient mis entre parenthèses" (30); then that Nimier's first non-fictional work on the figure of the siren had constituted a means of self-protection: "Il s'agissait pour moi de me mettre à l'abri, entre parenthèses, de redécouvrir à travers les livres des autres un semblant d'unité" (148).

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