

Taking Stock: Marie Nimier's Textual Cabinet of Curiosities

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The practice of life writing takes many textual forms, crosses numerous literary genres and even opens the space of the text to reinforce notions of connectivity between author and reader in intertextual ways. Despite these increasingly complex and multi-layered dimensions of accounts of selfhood in contemporary literature, the focus on recounting lived experiences through memories remains a central component of articulating subjective experience. However, beyond one's memories of interactions with others or recollections of loss, what can be said about the link between life writing and the gesture of accumulating objects? How do objects complicate or engage with self-representation in these texts? Jean Baudrillard, considering the importance of an object to notions of agency—an object that in his words is “abstrait de sa fonction et devenu relatif au sujet” (121) ‘abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject’ (91)—writes:

Les objets dans ce sens sont, en dehors de la pratique que nous en avons, à un moment donné, autre chose de profondément relatif au sujet, non seulement un corps matériel qui résiste, mais une enceinte mentale où je règne, une chose dont je suis le sens, une propriété, une passion. (120)

Apart from the uses to which we put them at any particular moment, objects in this sense have another aspect which is intimately bound up with the subject: no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they become mental precincts [sic] over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion. (91)

In this view objects, then, are appropriated in a gesture of authority; their significance will always be shaped by and filtered through the compilation of an individual's lived experience. Certain objects within a text are easily identifiable as souvenirs or relics; these physical things with some connection to one's past are thus vested with a particular value, be it aesthetic, economic, sentimental, or sacred. It should also be noted that even seemingly innocuous references to heteroclitite or everyday objects and how those objects are described, amassed, stored, recalled or displayed in fact plays an important role in demonstrating their importance to the process of memory work. Objects and the memories evoked by them indeed serve a primary writing imperative, reinforcing the author's place in time and space and also the author's relationship to self and others. At once the lingering traces of one's past and also an aggregation of stories evoked by an examination of them,

these curios focus attention on the relationship between the individual and the storage of memories and also on ways in which one might choose to expose and obscure the self.

The material aspect of life narratives is indeed a rich springboard from which to consider how a particular author chooses to present or focus on the multitude of lived experiences that make up multiple aspects of identity. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have noted: “Memory, apparently so immaterial, personal, and elusive, is always implicated in materiality, whether it be the materiality of sound, stone, text, garment... or the materiality of our very bodies.... Memory is evoked by the senses—and encoded in objects or events with particular meaning for the narrator” (27). Smith’s and Watson’s comments are especially applicable to contemporary French author Marie Nimier. Nimier vividly depicts the acute sensorial and corporeal world of her characters who suffer from impediments to speech, sight, and sound as well as physical illness and other symptoms of anxiety. Additionally, she peppers her works with allusions to collecting, motifs of collectors, and diverse objects that often reappear in other texts and are invested with a metaphorical significance related to dominant themes of her works. Nimier has also moved between fiction, autobiography, and autofiction, all the while highlighting the plurality of identities that informs her sense of self. The rich thematic and formal dimensions of her corpus as well as the fluidity of narrative voice have generated a wide range of analyses. Some focus on Nimier’s autofictional practices or the overlap between her fiction and autobiography,¹ while other studies develop the role of intertextuality in carving out a sense of self.² The absent presence of the paternal and its ramifications on the author/daughter’s silence or imperative to speak is another pertinent point of departure for discussing her works.³ Another aspect of a number of Nimier’s works is her evocation of the crime genre as metaphor of family abuse suffered at the hands of the father.⁴ Two other points of inquiry are scenes of violence and family secrets,⁵ and Nimier’s linguistic play that works to create a space in which the author appropriates writing on her own terms and in her own name.⁶ However, given the importance of materiality in these texts and the author’s own imagery, I wish to consider how the objects in her corpus might also shed light on the accumulation of Nimier’s textual “selves.”⁷ It is for this reason that I evoke in the title of this piece the cabinet of curiosity; it is a term that appears in two of Nimier’s texts: *La Nouvelle Pornographie* (‘New Pornography,’ 2000) and *Photo-Photo* (2010). Each time she deploys this concept, we are afforded insight into her own writing practices and the assortment of identities and memories to which she has recourse when exploring her sense of self (in the former) and into how she conceives of memory as a storeroom or archive of memory life (in the latter).

At the conclusion of *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, the first-person female narrator, Marie Nimier, articulates her understanding of this novel concept—a “new” pornography for the new millennium—with which she has been struggling throughout the narrative:

Il me semblait comprendre enfin ce que Gabriel appelait de ses vœux en lançant l'idée d'une *nouvelle pornographie*. Il avait beaucoup insisté pour que le recueil soit composé de textes hétéroclites mettant en scène des personnages solides et de préférence récurrents, comme un cabinet de curiosités dont les objets seraient de provenances disparates, mais tous engendrés par la même obsession: la quête vulnérable d'un ailleurs. (165)

I finally seemed to understand what Gabriel wanted in launching the idea of this *new pornography*. He had much insisted that the collection be composed of heteroclite texts which foreground solid and, preferably, recurring characters, like a cabinet of curiosities whose objects would have a variety of origins but would all be born from the same obsession: the vulnerable quest for an elsewhere.⁸

While the narrator's comments here suggest that she follows a writing imperative at the bequest of an other—in this case Gabriel Tournon, her editor and the object of her affections—readers familiar with Nimier's work will recall that Gabriel's character also appeared in *L'Hypnotisme à la portée de tous* ('Hypnotism Made Easy,' 1992) in which he also takes a keen interest in the writings of the first-person female narrator. The reappearance and circulation of this male editor figure, then, would ultimately reinvest the author/narrator with a sense of authority over the writing process. Gabriel is, after all, the product of Nimier's imagination. Thus, the reference in the above passage to recurring characters, diverse origins, and this nostalgic quest for a place that is not the here and now should be viewed rather as the author's own view of her writing style. Indeed, the very composition of the final product, the completed text that we read—*La Nouvelle Pornographie*—the one that is published as a novel by Marie Nimier, contains short, "pornographic" stories that flow between the real-life observations, recalled memories, and imaginary fantasies of the first-person narrator, "Marie Nimier."

The second reference to curiosity cabinets is found in *Photo-Photo*, a text in which the figure of the collector plays a clear role and has special importance in refocusing the unnamed first-person female narrator's perspective with regard to her own writing project, the text she is in the process of writing, which is also, as above, the narrative that comprises this finished work. "La chambre ressemblait plus à un cabinet de curiosités qu'au débarras Tout semblait précieux, le moindre objet était soigneusement disposé, et c'est avec un petit sourire que, baissant la voix, Huguette me présenta son domaine exclusivement dédié, expliqua-t-elle, à la vie et à l'œuvre de Karl Lagerfeld" (85) 'The room looked more like a cabinet of curiosities than a store room. Everything seemed valued, even the littlest object was carefully arranged, and with a little smile and lowering her voice, Huguette showed me her domain dedicated, she explained, to the life and work

of Karl Lagerfeld.’ In this example, the narrator observes the order and classification of Huguette’s display of various and (subjectively) highly valued objects that pay homage to the fashion designer. What this example also suggests is a paradox that lies behind the very act of collecting, one that is related to display and also concealment. In this case, Huguette’s careful arrangement of her stowed valuables is clearly for show, but at the same time it is not intended to be seen by everyone. Only those whom Huguette invites into her private space are privy to observing them. The actual texts that Nimier writes, in which she too shares personal and painful memories of loss, separation and violence, similarly straddle the line between private organization and published display. If the self-writing process is undoubtedly imbued with cathartic potential, it is nonetheless also fraught with its own set of difficulties in terms of what can and cannot be mentioned and who can and cannot be implicated, especially when the aims of achieving closure or healing almost always depend on breaking one’s silence about past traumas. It is precisely this fictional vehicle of a textual cabinet of curiosities, then, itself an object related to containment and display, which comes to depict the space of memory in these works.

The act of collecting has been explored within a number of diverse disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, museology, and economics. Nuancing this concept to include disordered or dysfunctional behaviors such as hoarding, psychologists and psychoanalysts have also considered the impulse to amass objects as a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Despite diverging entries into the subject, all of these fields help elucidate how the accumulation of things informs human behavior and notions of selfhood. The possessions that we cherish, the mementos that we keep, attempt to salvage a self that is not whole: “Possessions, as a part of identity construction, act as clues to past events and experiences. They facilitate the ongoing creation of the self-narrative” (Zonneveld and Biggeman 3). Whether these possessions are kept as transitional objects⁹ or as sources of nostalgia,¹⁰ reconnecting with memories is made possible via the material and tangible solidness of relics, souvenirs, knickknacks, and (presumably) non-utilitarian artifacts that one has saved, stored, and accumulated over time.

This article will focus on the idea of collecting more generally—or what Mieke Bal has termed a “collecting attitude.”¹¹ In addition to the appearance of the collector figure, we shall also include a sample inventory of a number of objects that circulate throughout Marie Nimier’s multi-generic, intertextual literary world. In a first example—the collection of curios—we shall explore the significance of several objects to the text in which they appear and also the role they play in the author’s own imaginary. In a second example—the protagonist as collector—we shall consider, through examples of collecting behavior, the particular drive to reminisce about or divorce oneself from certain memories. There is, however, a third type of collection that certainly has a real (thus non-fictional) importance to Nimier the author: a

number of her deceased father's possessions that she revisits and reexamines in the process of writing her autobiographical work *La Reine du silence* ('The Queen of Silence,' 2004). Here, Nimier's contemplation of her father's collection of objects awakens a sort of transgenerational-memory recollection, which in turn triggers her awareness of her own penchant for collecting objects. Through these three aspects of collecting, I mean to rethink how the accumulation of material objects functions in all of these texts—be they fiction, autofiction, or autobiography. If, as mentioned above, it was only relatively later in her writing career that Nimier openly avowed in autobiographical form her connection to objects (and collecting more generally), it is clearly not the first time that Nimier's textual imagination has evoked the motif of storage or collections. This collecting sensibility is reflected in an evolving fashion in Nimier's corpus with her predilection for using multiple first-person narrators. These narrative alter-egos move from "Marie Nimier" to an unnamed, although clearly identifiable first-person and even float between genders; however, the focus on the material world is one guarantee of recognition, both for the reader and, especially, for the author herself. What is at stake in this intertextual assemblage of objects is the roles that they play not only in allowing the narrator to revisit past traumas and loss but also in connecting the author's presence to other, more fictionalized voices that above all signify the primacy of life writing in her corpus.

Before turning to these three sections, it will be helpful to recall the often-cited work of Susan M. Pearce who provides a three-pronged classification for types of collecting: systematic collecting, fetishistic collecting, and souvenir collecting. In the first category, Pearce identifies systematic collecting as one informed by "intellectual rationale" whereby the collector focuses on amassing "complete sets which will demonstrate understanding achieved" (*On Collecting* 32). Fetishistic collecting Pearce defines as "an obsessive gathering [of] as many items as possible... to create the self" (32). It is the last category, souvenir collecting, that I would argue best exemplifies Nimier's strategies for invoking collecting in her works. In this category, Pearce writes, "[The] individual creates a romantic life-history by selecting and arranging personal memorial material to create what ... might be called an object autobiography, where the objects are at the service of the autobiographer" (32). I do not mean to apply the term "object autobiography" to the entirety of Nimier's corpus; however, it is clear that the circulation of objects—be they trinkets, masks, sweaters, etuis, letters or drawings—implies a correlative, material life-writing project between self and other.

Elsewhere, Pearce also develops the logic that encompasses the need, or motivation, to collect: "The emotional relationship of projection and internalization which we have with objects seems to belong with our very earliest experience and (probably therefore) remains important to us all our lives. Equally, this line of thought brings us back to the intrinsic link between our understanding of our own bodies and the imaginative construction of the material world" (*Museums* 47). If such objects are valued based on their

relevance to individual modes of perception, if one's motivation to collect such objects stems from the sentimental attachment that one has to them, it is of course important to consider both the objects that are saved and, when possible, those that are thrown away. Selection in this matter can certainly explain certain psychological barriers that govern how one shapes one's multiple senses of self.

Sculptures, Cigarette Lighters and Wool Scarves

In her work on the role that objects play in folklorists' creations and life review, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett distinguishes between types of objects to include five distinct sub-categories: "material companions" (or "companion objects"), "souvenirs and mementos," "memory objects," "collectibles," "ensembles" and "miniatures" (330-35). She identifies material companions as objects that are not necessarily valuable—she gives the example of a wooden spoon—and are used on a daily basis. She notes that they "accumulate meaning and value by sheer dint of their constancy in a life" (330). Souvenirs and mementos are "more highly focused stimuli for reminiscence" and especially through their display in the domestic sphere "offer access to the interior of the lives they signify, and as such constitute a kind of autobiographical archaeology (331). Memory objects are produced after an event has occurred, created in an act of remembrance; they are created "to materialize internal images, and through them, to recapture earlier experiences" (331). The acquisition of collectibles differs from the above-mentioned objects, and collectibles, she notes, are especially affected by the passage of time (332). Ensembles are less organized than collections proper, but they are revelatory in the role they play in the review of one's life: "Ensembles are as revealing as particular objects, whether the ensemble is a loosely assembled collection, carefully arranged tableau, new synthetic object, or entire environment. ... [Ensembles] have long served as a medium for life review" (333).

The diverse items mentioned in the title of this section would not appear to share any intrinsic qualities outside of their "thingness." If we were to attempt to classify them, as a collector might, we might say that the sculpture would normally represent an art object, one that is most often on public display and one that has a purely aesthetic and possibly profitable value, whereas the other two objects are often readily used in day-to-day life. With this sampling of objects, I suggest that this particular collection of curios actually functions in a cohesive way in Nimier's works, evoking memories and fantasies that connect seemingly disparate selves—fictional protagonists and first-person narrators—with the real-life author.

Sirène ('Siren,' 1985), Nimier's first text, abounds with references to suicide, drowning, speech, and silence. This debut novel recounts in fictional form the story of a young woman whose sense of self is troubled largely because of her father's absence and because of her complicity, coming later in

the narrative, in storing his secrets. The story in this early work paves the way for the author's own painful recollection of her father's untimely death and his imposing presence that is recounted in pure autobiographical form in *La Reine du silence* (2004). The female protagonist of *Sirène*, Marine Céline Rosalie Kerbay, an actress who attempts suicide in the opening pages by jumping into the Seine, confronts a number of emotional upheavals and experiences an acutely divided subjectivity throughout the narrative which she gradually sees as having roots in her childhood, specifically stemming from an absent father whom she was told died when she was a child. Of particular material importance in this work is an enameled terracotta sculpture of a mermaid that Marine receives as a gift on the very day she meets Bruno, her lover. This artifact is richly symbolic to the narrative of this single text as the hybridity of the mythical creature it represents—half-woman and half-fish—depicts the identificatory fragmentation that Marine herself experiences; it is also undeniably important to Nimier's corpus as a whole for the gamut of references to "sirènes" 'mermaids' or 'alarms' that are mentioned in every text she has written. Specifically in *Sirène*, for Marine, this object has temporal significance as it calls to mind the occasion of meeting Bruno, and it also serves as a mirror-like object, thus conveying how Marine sees herself. The similarity between this object and Marine's own corporeality is especially evident when Marine, wishing to accentuate their similar appearance or "air de famille" (60) strikes the same physical pose as the statue so that this duality might be captured in another dimension—the photograph. It is symbolic, therefore, when this object breaks as it drops from Marine's mother's hands on the last page of the novel. Madame Kerbay, clearly troubled by the similarities she senses Bruno shares with Marine's father—namely their egotism and unreliability, and thus Bruno's potential to emotionally hurt Marine—loses her grip on the mermaid sculpture. The loss of this object, coming as it does at the end of the work, suggests that Marine's self-fashioned mermaid likeness will undergo a change with the knowledge she has gained over the course of the narrative: namely, that her father is not deceased and that he had, instead, abandoned her. However, if the eponymous figurine is irreparably broken at the end of this fictional tale, it will resurface in alternate form in later texts, thus suggesting that Nimier was not ready to toss this object out completely from her own life-driven writing practices, nor relegate it to stored oblivion.

This mermaid figurine will reappear in the form of a cigarette lighter in *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, and in this text its status as collectible is that of a souvenir: it is offered to the first-person narrator, also named "Marie Nimier," by her editor Gabriel and her roommate Aline after Gabriel and Aline return from their romantic getaway. Aline and Gabriel chose this souvenir especially with Marie in mind for a reason that explicitly evokes the real Marie Nimier's authorship of *Sirène*, the novel discussed above. For Aline and Gabriel, the mermaid object (the cigarette lighter) reminds them of "Marie's" first novel in which a young actress attempts suicide by diving into the Seine to rejoin her mermaid sisters (178). Nonetheless, this object is an unwanted one as it

confirms Aline's and Gabriel's togetherness and their complicity that excludes Marie. In fact, souvenirs themselves serve two primary though different purposes related to memory. One might, for example, purchase a souvenir during a vacation that one has lived first-hand. Alternatively, one might purchase a souvenir, as Gabriel and Aline do in this story, as some tangible "proof" that they were remembering Marie during their trip. In this example, the souvenir serves to highlight one's absence from rather than participation in an experience. In any event, both the cigarette lighter and the sculpture depict one of the primary leitmotifs that circulate in Nimier's works and the author's own metatextual transformation of their symbolic representation that draws these texts together despite the evolution in narrative voice.

Also in *Sirène* we see the first reference to a woolen object—a textile material that is omnipresent in Nimier's corpus—here a woolen sock that Marine's mother fills with a mixture of toasted flaxseeds and sea salt as a homeopathic remedy to ease Marine's (feigned) sore throat: "Cette étrange bouillotte enroulée à la manière d'une écharpe autour du cou devait ... diffuser un certain magnétisme capable d'enrayer le plus douloureux des maux de gorge. En outre, ce remède avait l'avantage de tenir le malade cloué au lit, engoncé qu'il était dans son carcan de sel" (232) 'This strange hot water bottle, wrapped like a scarf around the neck was supposed to ... release a certain magnetism capable of getting rid of the worst of sore throats. Additionally, this remedy had the advantage of keeping the patient in bed, bundled up in a straightjacket of salt.' In this passage the medicinal qualities of this concoction seem less important than the material dimensions of the object, particularly its placement on the body. The sock, and especially its fabric (wool), a material noted for its "itchy" qualities in another text—*Les Inséparables* ('The Inseparables,' 2008)—is equated to a scarf, an object that will appear in *La Caresse* ('The Caress,' 1994) where the scarf is used as a substitute for a dog leash, and in *La Girafe* ('The Giraffe,' 1987) where the first-person narrator Joseph's scarf finds a mise-en-abyme-like replication in a painting of a giraffe who has a "large ruban" (56) 'a large ribbon' around its neck. This preliminary reference to fabric—in this case wool—is one attached to a rather banal item: the scarf, certainly not an item that one would normally collect or showcase. In this way, the scarf and its similarly used counterparts—ribbons and leashes around the neck—would at least initially appear to fall into the category of "material companions." And yet, the fact that the potentially restraining and suffocating properties of these items are also vividly described suggests a moment when the object might stand for a traumatic memory, possibly even symbolizing a noose used in the act of suicide.¹² Any object that surrounds the neck in Nimier's works is one that reinforces the duality evoked in the term "liens" 'links': these are ties that bind characters (human or animal) to others, guaranteeing companionship but also subservience, attachment, and limited mobility.

The Collector

A number of characters that populate Nimier's works are clearly described as collectors. While their motivations for collecting vary, this collecting attitude belies certain preoccupations the author feels in terms of accountability to the past (the need for collecting) and negotiating her sense of oneness among this miscellany of thingness. In *Sirène*, Marine Kerbay recounts her childhood collections of shamrocks and seashells (84); Bruno collects irons and "autres objets insolites" (71) 'other bizarre things.' Madame Kerbay, Marine's mother, has packrat-like tendencies, saving every household document such as "la moindre petite quittance de gaz ou d'électricité" (238) 'every last gas or electricity receipt,' but her careful accounting of household organization is contradicted by the absence of the "livret de famille" 'family record book,' an oversight that speaks greatly to Madame Kerbay's desire to forget the past and obscure the truth from her daughter (241). In *Anatomie d'un chœur* ('Anatomy of a Choir,' 1990), the siblings Médard and Raton are also collectors: Médard owns a collection of miniature gnomes who show or hide themselves in the display case depending on weather conditions; Raton is the archivist for the titular choir, and takes pride in her careful collection and preservation of the history of the choir itself and the histories of its members. In fact, her world falls apart when she learns that others are snooping through them:

S'il y avait une chose au monde lui appartenant, c'était bien cela, ces rangées de chemises cartonnées dans lesquelles s'organisait la mémoire du chœur, mémoire qui depuis quelques années semblait épouser les circonvolutions de son propre cerveau, lui apportant aux moments les plus froids la certitude d'un travail dont elle pouvait être fière, ce classement qu'elle avait mis des mois à effectuer.... (141)

If there was one thing in the world that belonged to her it was this, these rows of folders in which the memory of the choir was organized, a memory that for several years seemed merged with the convolutions of her own brain, giving her during her darkest moments the certainty that she produced a work of which she could be proud, this organization that took her months to complete....

We might also recall that the unnamed female narrator of *Les Inséparables* reexamines photographs, posters of animals that covered her childhood bedroom walls and letters from her best friend, Léa, as she writes, "J'ai gardé les lettres de cette époque, elles sont là, dans le tiroir de mon bureau, juste à côté de moi" (179) 'I kept the letters from this period. They are here, in my desk drawer right next to me.' By evoking the past and the present, the here and now and the fleeting dimension of time, the narrator demonstrates the importance of saving the past via objects. The specific manner in which these

letters are stored in *Les Inséparables* is one that will be recited almost verbatim in *La Reine du silence* in relation to Nimier's real-life collection of clipped-out excerpts. In *Les Inséparables*, these letters in a desk drawer suggest a physical proximity, hence a primary importance to remember Léa as she was at a certain moment in time. However, as *Les Inséparables* so poignantly demonstrates, the "je" of the text cannot exist without her figurative double; the narrator's sense of self is always dependent on her connection and communication with Léa.

In perhaps a more obvious manner, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, a very clear collector features in *Photo-Photo*, a text that in many ways plays with the taxonomy of both autobiography and autofiction, suggesting the reality of certain details and hiding others. This text is also one of Nimier's more self-reflexive novels, in the same vein as *La Nouvelle Pornographie* (where the narrator is also purportedly the author of the text we read) and *Les Inséparables* (where the unnamed first-person narrator is also an author). Here, too, she relies on the first-person female narrative voice of a woman who is an author, though she never reveals her name. This work opens with the scene of a photo shoot—by Karl Lagerfeld—of the narrator for a piece that will appear in *Paris Match* featuring nine prominent French writers of the 2008 *rentrée littéraire* 'start of the new literary season.' Although evoking both a verifiable document, the October 2, 2008 issue of *Paris Match*, as well as the legendary fashion designer, Nimier never, curiously, mentions herself by name. In *Photo-Photo*, the process of its writing is commented on both by the narrator and by her lover Stephen through the inclusion of conversations with him. Similarly, her hide-and-seek game of revealing and concealing continues in her decision to obscure certain details of Stephen's life (his last name, for example) while fully divulging her and Stephen's memories of their mutual friend Édouard Levé, a well-known (thus real) artist and writer who committed suicide in 2007, another detail that can be confirmed by any news source.

Huguette Malo, then, an elderly woman who lives alone, has very little in her life besides her cat and her collection of Lagerfeld memorabilia. Her collection is in fact so vast that she actually rents a separate apartment next door to her "living" space to house her collection. However, while the Lagerfeld collection itself has very little to do with the narrative we read, Huguette's character strikes a particularly emotive chord with the narrator. Their unlikely friendship develops after Huguette writes the narrator a letter and mails it to the narrator's publisher once the above-mentioned photograph is published with a request to know where the narrator purchased the green tennis shoes shown in *Paris Match*. The object that catches Huguette's eye—the narrator's rather unique choice of shoes—is a somewhat unexpected motivator for wishing to contact the author. The narrator interprets this gesture as a pretext, knowing that Huguette, an older lady prone to memory lapses (like the "fictional" author herself) might be instead lonely or out of sorts. This unusual request touches the narrator in a profound way:

Longtemps j'ai photographié des pieds, plutôt que des visages, dans les fêtes foraines, les boîtes de nuit, les centres commerciaux. Par timidité sans doute, plus que par fascination—nul fétichisme dans cette démarche (façon de parler dirait Huguette Malo). Je pensais aujourd'hui m'être éloignée de cette figure (façon de parler toujours), ou plus exactement avoir réussi à déplacer mon regard, en fixant mon attention, cette fois, sur les mains de mes personnages... [Et] voilà qu'en m'adressant cette lettre une vieille dame m'obligeait à redescendre sur terre. (62)

For a long time I photographed feet instead of faces, at fairs, in nightclubs, in shopping centers. Surely because of my timidity more than fascination—there is no fetishism in this approach (in a manner of speaking, Huguette Malo would say). Today I thought I was far removed from this figure (again, in a manner of speaking), or, more specifically, I thought I had succeeded in displacing my gaze by fixing my attention instead on my characters' hands... And now by sending me this letter, this old woman is making me come back down to earth.

By obliging the narrator to “look back” or “look down,” presumably at her shoes, an object of arguably little value, Huguette pushes the narrator to see things differently. The introspection that the above passage evinces is again one that is first set in motion by a material “thing.” In the contemplation of this object, however, not only does the narrator change perspective, she also changes position. If her “objectivity” was first one in terms of being the object of Lagerfeld's camera, this new perspective of focusing on another object re-bestows on the narrator a sense of agency—allowing her to see her own objects (and herself in fact) differently and with a new type of vision.

The Inheritor

In the above-mentioned novel, *Sirène*, Marine grapples with the late-in-life revelation that her father is not deceased; she also goes against her mother's wishes to see her father and makes a pact with him never to speak of their meeting, thus tying her down with a gnawing guilt and sense of complicity. During her childhood, Marine relied on the power of her imagination to fill the void of the absent father. In this fictional space, the female protagonist, having no photographic trace of her father, describes the power of her imagination to create his image: “Elle le modelait au gré de ses désirs, l'habillait selon ses goûts, il était sa chose, son objet. Elle le possédait, pour elle toute seule” (*Sirène* 148-49) ‘She shaped him according to her desires, dressed him according to her tastes; he was her thing, her object. She possessed him, he was hers alone.’ On the one hand these comments evoke a young daughter's wish to be the apple of her father's eye; on the other hand,

they suggest the power of possession and desire to create a hermetic space in which to house these objects. When compared to several details revealed in the autobiographical text *La Reine du silence*, we are invited to draw close parallels between the absent father in both texts—one fictional and one real. Of particular note is an anecdotal detail that the author shares in *La Reine du silence*: Roger Nimier's aversion to being photographed—especially with his children. In this later piece of life writing, when Nimier makes explicitly clear that she could not find a single photograph of her father taken with his children, the above passage (from the fictional story) comes to assume an especially important role, as the fictional character Marine must imagine and create—with photographic-like accuracy—the image of her absent father. It is this imaginative creation that allows for the emergence of personal autonomy, since the daughter will mold, shape, and ultimately possess the image of a father she did not know. If the family photograph serves as a material, visual trace of “togetherness,” then its absence from Nimier's real, deceased father's belongings (on which Nimier reflects as she writes *La Reine du silence*) calls to mind the father's physical absence from Marine's life in *Sirène*. As such, the missing, tangible object (the photograph), which would stand in for the absent father, awakens an obvious imperative to create or remember her father in the space of the imaginary.

La Reine du silence is, without question, Nimier's only purely autobiographical text to date. The link between materiality and life writing (as furthered by Smith and Watson) is made especially evident in this work and it might even be equated with what Pearce would term “object autobiography.” In this example, the accumulation of objects in question are souvenirs and other possessions belonging to her father, author Roger Nimier, a formidable and yet absent force in Marie Nimier's life. Inheriting these objects is not simply a question of changing ownership or stashing them away without a second thought. These traces of her father open up new sets of questions about her father's biography (his life memory) and where she stood in relation to him. In short, his belongings—the objects he chose to keep throughout his life and which were passed on to his family after he died—play an important role in allowing Nimier to better understand her now-deceased father in ways that she was unable to while he was alive. In turn, his objects evoke her memories of him and force Nimier to reconsider how her father's behavioral traits (including his violent tendencies) affected her psyche and shed light on some of her actions, both conscious and unconscious.

In the passage that follows, we see Nimier's self-profession of her own tendencies to collect:

Je prétendais dans un chapitre précédent que je n'étais pas une collectionneuse—le contraire d'une collectionneuse—et pourtant s'est constituée dans le premier tiroir de mon bureau une drôle de collection : au fil de mes lectures, j'ai mis de côté des textes qui parlent des différentes parties de notre anatomie. Ils sont classés par éléments,

en partant du bas. Pieds, cheville, mollet ... Patiemment, je dresse l'inventaire comme on dresse une table, mettant chaque chose à sa place, chaque organe ayant sa chemise, chaque membre son dossier ... Je lis, je découpe, je classe comme si justement cet essentiel, cet inexplicable était trop envahissant et que la seule façon de sauver sa peau était de le contenir avec méthode et courtoisie, comme si je pouvais ainsi recomposer le corps disloqué de mon père. Le reconstituer pour le garder à distance, tant il est difficile de vivre avec un fantôme ... Les mots, voilà les seules choses qu'il me plaît de collectionner. Ils ne m'encombrent pas. Jamais n'ont provoqué en moi cette sensation d'étouffement que me donne l'accumulation des objets. Je me demande pourquoi, par quel miracle ils échappent à la règle commune. Peut-être qu'en nommant on se débarrasse de l'aspect pesant du monde. (*Reine* 130-31)

I claimed in a previous chapter that I was not a collector—that I was in fact the opposite of a collector—and yet in the top drawer of my desk a curious collection has formed: as I read, I put aside texts that speak of different parts of our anatomy. They are organized by body parts, starting at the bottom. Feet, ankle, calf. Patiently I take stock like one sets a table, putting each thing in its place, each organ has its folder, each limb its file ... I read, I clip, I organize exactly as if this essential part, this unexplainable element was too intrusive and that the only way to save it was to contain it with technique and respect, as if I could thus reconstitute the fragmented pieces of my father. Reconstitute it in order to keep it at a distance, since it is difficult to live with a phantom ... Words, these are the only things that I like to collect. They do not weigh me down. Nothing else has ever given me the sensation of suffocating as the accumulation of objects has. I wonder why and by what miracle words escape the common rule. Perhaps by naming, one lets go of the overbearing weight of the world.

In this passage, Nimier reneges on her initial thoughts about her own relation to collecting. She cannot, for example, deny the reality of the “real-life” desk of curiosities that she has amassed over time. On the one hand, she views the storage of objects as a stifling burden. Yet on the other hand, her predilection for collecting an olio of literary excerpts shifts the domain of object collecting back to the textual world. Words, for example, have a liberating potential. This collection therefore suggests that Nimier’s literary production is constructed on a quest for catharsis. Crafting language is thus the tool with which this process might be achieved.

This passage also highlights a quasi-fetishistic method to organizing these clippings. Each fragment, for example, describes a piece of one’s body. However, these individual scraps lose meaning at the moment they are divorced from their original source (the primary text in which Nimier found

them). In order for the collection to make sense (or have meaning), these disparate clippings must therefore be reconstituted to form a whole—in very much the same light that the young Marine used in her imaginary reconstitution of her absent father.

Another echo that links both *Sirène* to *La Reine du silence* is a metacommentary in this latter text about the duality of her childhood nicknames—the “Queen of Silence,” the name by which her father called her, and the “Siren of the Firefighters,” coined by her mother. Both names have obvious ramifications on Nimier’s own relationship to speech and silence, and in many ways writing has proven to be the terrain on which finding her (own) voice has been necessary:

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. Il y a là une logique qui fait sourire tant elle semble éloignée de toute préoccupation littéraire. On pourrait lire cet enchaînement d’une autre façon, et tracer du texte sur les sirènes à celui sur la pornographie une longue phrase qui raconterait l’histoire de l’émergence du corps, de sa réunification. On pourrait même parler de la résurgence du corps dans les romans de ces vingt dernières années, et l’on serait étonné de voir que de nombreux exemples confirmeraient cette intuition. Tout semble si simple quand on prend les livres comme une succession d’épisodes, et non comme des objets finis, fermés sur eux-mêmes. Et que l’on admet que leurs auteurs sont liés par des questions qui les dépassent. Pour en arriver à formuler cette hypothèse, j’empruntai des détours périlleux. Très jeune, je me mis à faire chambre à part avec moi-même, très jeune et jusqu’au grand plongeon dans la Seine ... Les deux êtres cohabitaient tant bien que mal sous un même nom. (Reine 145-46)

Wasn’t the simplest solution to divide myself in two like the mermaid? To be both a woman and a fish? She who sings and she who keeps quiet? Fish are mute and so is the giraffe that would become the main character in my second novel. This logic seems amusing inasmuch as it appears distanced from any literary preoccupation. This thought process could also be read in a different way and trace a long sentence, from the text on mermaids to the one on pornography, a sentence which tells the story about the emergence of a body, of its reunification. One could even talk about the resurgence of the body in novels of the last twenty years, and one would be astonished to see numerous examples that confirm this intuition. It all seems so simple when we consider books as a succession of episodes rather than finite and self-contained objects. And that we admit that their authors are linked by questions that escape them. In order to arrive at formulating

this hypothesis, I took perilous detours. When I was young, I started to live apart from myself, right up until the big dive into the Seine. ... Two beings lived together for better or for worse under one name.

The metadiscourse provided in this passage clearly links the author's own identificatory problems to the fictional texts she has authored. The paradoxical question first posed by her father, written on a postcard to the young Marie—"Que dit la Reine du Silence?" (144) 'What does the Queen of Silence say?'—was therefore considered (in Nimier's view) as an injunction to remain silent. While writing ultimately became an outlet for her voice, it was an act that nonetheless contained a number of risks for Marie, as she feared usurping the literary authority of the family name in light of her father's passing. This passage attests to these difficulties by first confirming the sense of self-division that she experienced as a child, which found its literary representation in *Sirène* and *La Girafe*. In view of *La Nouvelle Pornographie*, Nimier at first situates its publication as reflecting a more general literary zeitgeist of other novels that showcase the body. However, what becomes especially revelatory in these comments is the author's view of her own literary production as one that is an ongoing collection and not, for example, a disparate collection of self-contained texts. In other words, the entirety of her own literary output must be considered as an accumulation of selfhood.

Throughout Nimier's works certain collectibles, collections and collectors are especially revelatory in terms of the connection between life writing and memory work. What is saved, how these items are stored, and how they might change shape or owner from text to text suggests a metaphor for the transmission of memory and history. Behind all of these instances of collecting, amassing, and accumulating, the quest for identity that lies at the very core of her projects of life writing has led to a large, disparate collection of narrative voices, including an omniscient third-person narrator, first-person narrators that are either male or canine, and first-person female narrators who are never named. That these voices cross clear divisions in terms of self and other, human and animal, man and woman suggests the accumulation of articulations of identity that are complemented by the power of objects to act in multi-dimensional ways. From her first novel, *Sirène*, which features a female protagonist who bears a striking resemblance to Nimier herself, Nimier has always privileged the symbolic status of objects and their lasting power to translate with their material qualities that which she might otherwise have been unable to articulate.¹³

Notes

1. See Anne-Marie Jézéquel's "Marie/Marine: À son corps défendant," Jeanne-Sarah de Larquier's "Espace autobiographique et fiction dans les romans de Marie Nimier de *Sirène* aux *Inséparables*," Joëlle Papillon's "L'auteure mise en scène et mise à nu: Sur les fausses confessions de *La nouvelle pornographie*," and Cathy Wardle's "Ce qui n'est pas moi: Writing the Self, Desiring the Other in *La Nouvelle Pornographie*."
2. See Ana de Medeiros's "Puzzling out the Self: Identity and Intertextuality in *Les Inséparables*."
3. See Eilene Hoft-March's "*La Reine du Silence* Goes Public: Confessions of a Writer's Daughter," Margaret-Anne Hutton's "Authority and Authorship in the Works of Marie Nimier: 'Points de re-père,'" Carol J. Murphy's "Tel père, telle fille? Filiations paternelles dans les romans de Marie Nimier," Anne Strasser's "Raphaële Billetdoux, Marie Nimier: des filles aux pères, le travail de filiation ou l'invention du père," Marinella Termite's "Le Père ou le gant de l'écriture," and Béatrice Vernier-Larochette's "*Bouche cousue* et *La Reine du silence*: Une réconciliation intime et publique."
4. See Lorna Milne's "Who Done What? Marie Nimier's Text Crimes" in *New Approaches to Crime in French Literature, Culture and Film*.
5. See David Gascoigne's "Articulations: Violence, the Body and Language in Marie Nimier."
6. See Jeanne-Sarah de Larquier's "*La Nouvelle Pornographie* de Marie Nimier: De la question maudite aux mots dits."
7. It should be noted that Baudrillard makes a clear distinction between collecting and accumulating, seeing the latter as "le stade inférieur" (146) 'the inferior stage [of collecting]' (111). For Baudrillard, collecting always has a cultural aim: namely, a goal of preservation and potentially economic gain. For the purposes of my argument, I mean to focus more on the motif of collecting in Nimier's works and how that plays a key role in her memory process.
8. Here and unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
9. See Donald Woods Winnicott's study "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession."

10. See Russell W. Belk's "The Role of Possessions in Constructing and Maintaining a Sense of Past."

11. See Mieke Bal's article "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting" in *The Cultures of Collecting*, where she articulates the daunting task of defining collecting and calls the "collecting attitude" on the other hand "unmistakable and distinct" (99).

12. The act of suicide is one that also features in a number of Nimier's narratives. It could be argued that Nimier's knowledge of her father's attempted suicide, recounted in *La Reine du silence*, has found an outlet in its projection on Nimier's fictional others in her texts.

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