

Incest in the 1990s: Reading Anaïs Nin's 'Father Story'.

Abstract: In the summer of 1933, diarist, author and critic Anaïs Nin joined her father for a short vacation in France. Nin wrote about the trip in her diary afterwards, referring to it as the 'Father Story.' In the story, she details how, aged 30, she embarked upon an affair with her father which would last for several months. Rather than displaying the signs of trauma that we have come to expect from the incest narrative such as dissociation, blame and recrimination, the 'Father Story' is more ambiguous in its tone. Part-tribute to the father, part-seduction narrative, part-confession, this is a story that resists categorisation – a resistance that has ethical, critical and formal ramifications for our reading of incest narratives.

Upon its publication in the early 1990s, critics responded to the 'Father Story' as fantastical, excessive and vulgar. These responses form part of a wider American father story during this period; a story about memory, therapy culture, family values and the concealed rules of testimony. This article reads Anaïs Nin's narrative as a text which raises fundamental questions about why certain father (and daughter) stories are culturally acceptable and others are not.

Keywords: Anaïs Nin, incest, 1990s.

In July, 1933 around three weeks after the event, Anaïs Nin wrote an account of a holiday in her diary and called it the 'Father Story'. Usually, she would not mark out diary entries with titles but in a life filled with events that were unusual, spectacular, even aberrant, this particular event was especially worthy of note. Having been estranged from her father Joaquín Nin for almost 20 years, aged 30, Anaïs Nin was reunited with the erstwhile pianist and invited to join him in Valescure, France for a short visit. Joaquín Nin was recovering from lumbago and initially appeared 'cold and formal' to Anaïs Nin, although she later writes in the 'Father Story' that she was also 'dazzled' by his intellect, physical stature and charisma, considering her father to be the 'complete synthesis' of all the men she had ever loved (204-5). In turn, Joaquín Nin proclaimed his daughter 'the woman of my life', expressing sorrow that he could not kiss her 'as [he] would like to' (Nin: 208).

One page later in the 'Father Story', Anaïs Nin describes how 'timid and unwilling, yet passionately moved' and 'with a strange violence' she lifts her negligee and lies over her father. 'My yielding was immense, with my whole being, with only that core of fear', she

writes. Leaving her father that first night, Nin feels herself ‘poisoned by this union’ with a ‘sense of guilt’ that ‘weigh[s] down’ on her ‘joy.’ ‘I had the man I loved with my mind; I had him in my arms, in my body’, Nin muses, yet because of ‘the similitudes between us [...] my pleasure is atrophied’ (210).

The following morning, Joaquín Nin senses his daughter’s hesitancy about continuing the affair but wins her over by convincing her that they ‘are living out something tremendous, fantastic, unique’ (210). Throughout the holiday, they continue to sleep with each other, forging what Nin refers to as ‘a pact of similarity’ through their shared personality traits and past experiences (207). Nin appears, at times, deeply flattered by her father’s attentions but also returns on several occasions throughout the story to the fact that she feels an ‘deeper, inner holding back’ when having sex with her father. When the holiday comes to an end, watching her father leave at the station she describes herself as ‘inert’ and in a ‘leaden mood’, ‘unfocused [and] bewildered.’ Yet, in her next entry she describes herself as ‘ensorcelled’ by her Father with a ‘great craving’ for him. Looking back on the holiday, Nin writes ‘it was in my flights with my Father that I had found joy’ (218-9).

Timid, unwilling, frightened, strange, violent, awkward, inert – it is clear that Nin does not feel entirely good about having sex with her father. But neither does she feel entirely bad. She also describes herself as ‘passionately moved’, ‘joyful’, ‘amused’, ‘touched and amazed’ by this encounter with her father which unfolded into an affair that lasted for at least 3 months, by Nin’s account. Part-tribute to the father, part-seduction narrative, part-confession, this is a story that resists categorisation. Rather than displaying the obvious signs of trauma that we have come to expect from the incest narrative such as dissociation, blame and recrimination (see, for example, Herman and Hirschman: 2000), the ‘Father Story’ is ambiguous in its tone.

Whilst every patriography is not an incest narrative, the incest narrative exists at the extreme borders of writing about the father: ethically, culturally and formally. Thus, in thinking about the incest narrative, we also think about the patriography more broadly: its investments, desires and permutations. The ‘Father Story’ is a patriography that is fundamentally ambivalent about what a father is and what he should, or shouldn’t, do. Furthermore, as a filiography, it generates the same questions around the figure of the daughter. This article will argue that Nin’s text profoundly disrupts entrenched preconceptions about the incest narrative as a site for expressing victimhood, working out trauma or daughterly recrimination. I will suggest that we should reconsider the story as problematizing these cultural discourses, particularly those produced in the 1980s and 90s. In

analysing the reception of *Incest* (the unexpurgated diary that contained the ‘Father Story’), we realise the extent to which critics’ readings of Nin’s incest narrative were shaped by prevailing anxieties and prejudices about the telling of incest.

The incest narrative invites anxieties about the relationship between truth and language, what Janice Doane and Devon Hodges describe as ‘the gap between the experience of incest and its narrative representation.’ Doane and Hodges have written with great insight about the ways in which public American incest narratives¹ from the 1970s onwards have shifted through several rhetorical models which they broadly characterise as the feminist incest story, the recovered memory story, the false-memory story and the incest survivor story. Their argument, that ‘incest narratives [are] defined in relation to specific historical contexts, cultural politics, and kinds of reception’, will be extended in this article to think about how an incest narrative from one time translates through its reception in another (2).

Published in the cultural crossfire between the recovered and false memory movements, Nin’s ‘Father Story’ mobilised cultural anxieties to do with the veracity of the incest experience and its narration. I would like to suggest that reviews of the ‘Father Story’, whilst part of a longer trajectory of bad critical feeling towards Nin, also speak more broadly to the ways in which the incest narrative and, by association, the patriography is culturally sanctioned and moulded. American reviewers were irritated by the ‘Father Story’ but their reviews also displayed a critical blindness to the reasons for this irritation, a failure by critics to interrogate their own cultural locatedness as readers of incest.

In making this argument this article responds, in part, to Paul John Eakin’s reading of another incest narrative, Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss* (1997), in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999). In the chapter ‘“The Unseemly Profession”: Privacy, Inviolable Personality, and the Ethics of Life Writing’, Eakin considers critical and media responses to *The Kiss*, a text that bears certain productive resemblances to Nin’s ‘Father Story’ particularly in its depiction of the adult-onset incest that plays out between Harrison and her previously estranged father. Reading between the dust-jacket blurb, cover art, reviews and promotional interviews with Harrison, Eakin uses ‘the reception of *The Kiss* to capture the climate of the so-called age of memoir in which we live’, a climate characterised by an anxiety regarding the potential ethical ‘harm’ caused by life writing texts and a widespread mistrust of the motivations of those who seek to write and sell them (157).

However, what Eakin does not explicitly attend to in his reading of *The Kiss* is how critical responses to Harrison’s texts (which often echoed earlier media responses to the ‘Father Story’) were produced not only as part of the ‘so-called age of memoir’ but also out

of a widespread and profound cultural ambivalence towards incest narratives, in particular. Part of the work here will be to argue that the incest narrative, more than any other sub-genre, both writ large and mobilised readers' questions and fears concerning the authenticity, hidden motivations and facticity of the life text in the 1990s.

Apart from Helen Tookey's brief reading in *Anaïs Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing A Thousand Roles* (2005), little critical attention has been paid to the cultural reception of the 'Father Story' in the 1990s, although much was written about the story itself during this period (see Bair: 1995, Fitch: 1993, Henke: 1997, for example). The critical tendency, which has something in common with Eakin's reading of Harrison, has been to look for Nin's motivations in sleeping with her father rather than to attend to the aesthetics of the text or its cultural import. As we shall see, reviewers of the 'Father Story' share this desire to get to the bottom of Nin's feelings for her father. When reviewers do attend to the aesthetics of Nin's text, her style is invariably read as "too much": too literary, too melodramatic, and too florid for an incest narrative.

In his Preface to *Incest*, Rupert Pole - Nin's second husband and co-editor of the unexpurgated diaries - speculates that Anaïs Nin was driven to sleep with her father as an adult so that she could first assure herself of his attachment and then abandon him 'as punishment for abandoning her as a child' (Pole, x). By this logic, the 'Father Story' is a form of retaliatory "payback" on Anaïs Nin's part: she sleeps with her father in order to be able to abandon him, as he once abandoned her. Read this way, the 'Father Story' enacts a reversal of the power dynamic that has been read as characterising father-daughter incest (see, for example, Herman and Hirschman: 1981, Herman: 2000), and implies a toppling, and topping, of patriarchal dominance. This payback interpretation also provides a rationale and motivation for Nin's behavior, a motivation added to by biographer Noël Riley Fitch who also suggests that Nin was sexually abused by her father before he abandoned the family. While Fitch admits, with little sense of contradiction that '[t]his fact is impossible to prove conclusively', she goes on to state that Nin's subsequent behavior, especially towards her father, 'fits the classical patterns of a child who has been seduced' (Fitch: 3).

As it is, whilst other more ethically stringent critics such as biographer Deirdre Bair have investigated Nin's childhood relationship with her father (in Bair's case, with the assistance of psychologists expert in child abuse - see Bair: 1995), it is difficult to prove whether Nin was sexually abused by her father as a child or not and even more problematic to draw a straight line from this theory to the 'Father Story.' However, such interpretations are understandable in that they explain what, for many, would otherwise be inexplicable: the

mutually consensual sexual relationship between an adult daughter and her father. It is less palatable to countenance the fact that Nin was sexually attracted to her father and that, complicated and historically determined as this attraction might have been, her sleeping with him was not entirely motivated by some kind of elaborate payback strategy or by an earlier sexual trauma. A more productive consideration of the ‘Father Story’ avoids guesswork regarding Nin’s motivations and, instead, reads the text as one which disrupts investments in the “real event”, the presumed “what happened-ness” behind the life text.

‘It is a kind of supreme treachery’: writing the ‘Father Story.’

Whilst Nin met her father on several occasions leading up to the holiday in Valescure that inspired the ‘Father Story’, he was physically absent for the majority of her childhood and teenage years. Having abandoned the family when Anaïs Nin was 9 to marry one of his music students, nonetheless, her father’s presence loomed large in Nin’s life. Her early diaries (*Linotte*, in particular) are testimonies to paternal loss, longing and fantasy; filled with letters to her father that would often go unanswered. Furthermore, in accounts of the diary’s genesis, Nin often insisted that her father was the inspiration:

Originally, though, it was intended for my father. That puts a slightly different slant on it. I began [the diary] at eleven, and I meant it to be a journal of the journey to America, a strange country that he feared because he didn’t know English. I was going to make such a description of it as to entice him to come back to our family. (Interview with Keith Berwick, 1970).

As Nin continued to write the diary throughout her life, the desires that motivated it undoubtedly shifted. It became a space for psychological exploration, for confession, and often a practice ground for the stories that would go into her published fiction. However, for all that the ‘Father Story’ depicts a reunion between father and daughter, it also testifies to the original sense of abandonment, not to mention the morass of confused emotions that Nin had developed towards her father as an adult. Theirs was a relationship marked by mutual identification, narcissism and game-playing.

However, whilst Nin often publically represented the diary as written for her father, privately there was one story that he did not wish her to tell. Following the holiday in Valescure, Nin recounts a conversation with her father in which he assures her that there is ‘[n]o need to write’ about their relationship because they are ‘old enough to remember it all.’ Nin responds:

I know this is not true. When I read back in the journal I have many surprises. Faithfulness to the nuances of continuity and progression is only obtained by the daily

record. I feel it imperative. It is a kind of supreme treachery. Because Father had begged me not to write. Faithfulness to the journal seems to force me each time to write in spite of [...] finally, my promise to Father. (243-4).

In contrast to Couser's idea that the patriography is often written to shore up, repair or compensate for a 'flawed relationship' (2012), Nin's decision to write about the 'Father Story' figures rather as 'supreme treachery' towards her father. The act of writing against her father's will puts a distance between them – it is an act of individuation from rather than the consolidation of the father-daughter relationship. However, in the 'Father Story' itself, Nin constructs bonds of similarity with her father, staking the claim to a relationship that Couser reads in the patriography. As such, we should view the 'Father Story' as being both a narrative of affiliation and disaffiliation: a push/pull story between father and daughter.

From the beginning of the 'Father Story', Nin stresses her similarities with her father, taking these as signs of self-validation. Like Nin, her father has an 'inordinate respect of illusion' which plays out in his personal toilette, despite his being ill:

[i]n all the days of his illness there was not a moment of disillusion. He bore it with such grace and such dignity. Though it hurt him deeply to move, he took his bath, he shaved; his hair was perfumed, his nails immaculate.' (205)

For Nin, her father's toilette signifies his artificiality, his appearance is made unreal ('mask-like') through the attention he pays to it. Whilst she reads his behaviour as coquetry, she also recognises this as seductive artistry: 'at the same moment that I saw these traits in Father, I saw them starkly in myself' (205). If Nin sees her father as a seducer, it is because it takes one to know one.

During the 'Father Story', Nin refers to this kind of recognition as a 'pact of similarity' with her father which serves to compound their intimacy, an intimacy that she had craved up to this point (207). But this 'pact' also marks the pair out as special and distinct from others. Nin muses: '[b]y current standards we are amoral. We have not been true to human beings but to ourselves' (204). For the most part, she does not ponder the moral ramifications of her incestuous relationship with her father. Describing their relationship as 'barbaric and subliminal', it is clear that, for Nin, it is powered by instinctive drives – a portrait which sharply contrasts with her later emphasis on a state of shared, cultured elegance. The narrative swings between lauding the instinctive stirrings of the 'blood' and the 'dim, veiled [...] joy' of this coupling in terms that aim to stress the unconscious, inarticulate merging of bodies, and the cultivated arts of seduction – the words, the perfume and the scene-setting (212). The 'Father Story' wants its sex all ways: barbaric and artful, subliminal and conscious, uncivilised and artful, conscious and cultured. The constant

shifting between these positions gives us a sense of Anaïs Nin's ambivalence: not only towards the event itself but towards putting it in writing.

During the holiday, Nin's father talks to her about his sexual relationship with her mother: 'I discovered a war, a sexual war [...] Father trying to ascend as an artist; Mother the spider, voracious, bestial, not voluptuous, naturalistic, unromantic.' In the 'Father Story,' Rosa Nin embodies sex without artifice, the naturalist to her husband's seductive artist:

Terrible list of crude details. Smell of [mother's] perspiration, strong smell of unwashed sex. These things tortured my Father, the aristocrat, cursed besides with an excessive sense of smell – a passion for perfumes and refinements. The period bandages left in the night table, the underclothing not changed every day. (206)

Nin's mother is absent for the rest of the 'Father Story,' compounding the notion that the maternal is displaced in the patriography (Couser: 2012). Husband and daughter figure Rosa Nin's body as grotesque: dirty, sexually voracious, and unsexy in counterpoint to the refined, controlled seductiveness of the father. It is clear that Nin aligns herself with her father against her mother in the 'Father Story,' making sure that she notes down the contrasting details of her own seductive arsenal, such as her 'satin negligee' (207).

Following this denigration of the mother (a moment which should remind us that Nin was writing her incest narrative when Freud's story of the family romance was in the ascendancy), Nin and her father have sex for the first time. Recalling the moment her father asks to kiss her, Nin describes herself as 'tortured by a complexity of feelings, wanting his mouth, yet afraid, feeling I was to kiss a brother, yet tempted – terrified and desirous.' When she consents, the kiss brings

a wave of desire [...] More terror than joy. The joy of something unnameable, obscure. He so beautiful – godlike and womanly, seductive and chiselled, hard and soft. A hard passion. (209)

We cannot *interpret* Nin's response to the kiss because her response changes, it flickers between terror and joy, is both and neither, just as her father is hard and soft, godlike and womanly. We do not know whose 'wave of desire' is 'unleashed', making the ascription of agency and arousal problematic. With no clear sense of the roles played in this scene, the reader would be forgiven for not knowing what kind of story they are reading. Viewed from one angle, the 'Father Story' is couched in the terms of a clichéd romance novel – where the hero is always hard, chiselled and godlike and the heroine desirous, yielding, and tempted. From another, Nin is terrified, afraid, 'timid and unwilling' (209). Is this a romance or an incest narrative?

The 'Father Story's' "genre trouble" here has to do with the way that Nin reveals the

proximity of these two forms. It suggests not only that incest might play out the dynamics of a romance novel but also that incest might be coded, and experienced, as erotic. With this troubling of genre boundaries, the ‘Father Story’ hit a nerve when it was published in 1992, at a time when American readers were trying to figure out whether they could tell a factual incest narrative from a fictional one.

Reading *Incest* and incest in the 1990s.

The ‘Father Story’ was published as part of *Incest: from “A Journal of Love.” The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin: 1932-34* at a point when

[w]omen’s incest stories were the subject of much public attention and controversy. This debate centred on narratives of the recovered memory movement (in which daughters recall long-forgotten experiences of incest) and opposing narratives of the false-memory syndrome movement (in which therapists are attacked for encouraging daughters to develop false memories). At issue was the truthfulness of a dominant form of women’s “telling,” what we call the “recovery story” (Doane and Hodges: 1).

Whilst the ‘Father Story’ is not a recovery story in the sense that Doane and Hodges understand it, the reception of the text should be read as part of the same debate about truth-telling and the incest narrative. As such, it is both noteworthy and jarring that none of the critics who reviewed the ‘Father Story’ at the time reflected on the extent to which their own responses to the text were shaped by this debate.

The ‘recovered memory movement’, underpinned by texts such as Ellen Bass and Laura Davis’ bestselling self-help text *The Courage to Heal* and Judith Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest*, proposed that women could remember repressed experiences of childhood sexual abuse in adult life and that, in fact, the only way to recover from these experiences was to bring them up to the light. In *The Courage to Heal*, Bass and David encourage survivors of childhood incest to write about their experiences, the idea being that writing would take women from states of disaffection: depression, numbness, self-loathing, into states of positive affect. For Bass and David, once the writing began, feeling good would follow. But for supporters of the concept of recovered memory, writing about incest also became a way to regulate feeling, to release it, contain it and manage it. However, the authors stress that women writing about their experiences of incest should not attempt to make their work literary:

Try to forget everything you’ve ever been told about writing. What you’re going to do is a kind of free writing, or stream of consciousness writing. It’s not about making art or polished crafting or trying to make sense to someone else. Rather, it’s a way to short-circuit some of your censors to get to what you need to say. (28)

There is a crucial disjunct, then, in discourses around the writing of incest in this period. On the one hand, Bass and Davis counsel a non-literary, non-readerly approach to writing about incest. On the other, published accounts of incest, both overtly fictional and autobiographical proliferate during this period. Incest became an industry in America from the late 70s onwards.

Broadly speaking, from the late 1980s onwards, cultural attitudes in America towards incest narratives changed. Recovery narratives like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, which detailed both the recovery of lost memories of incest and the recovery from these memories, were popular up to the early 1990s. But over the following decade there was a swing towards a more sceptical stance, evidenced by the concept of the 'false memory' narrative. In false memory critiques

a writer attempts to provide scientific evidence about how easily memories are distorted in order to invalidate women's claims to have recovered true memories of incest, especially in therapy. [...] Writers who attack "recovery stories" believe that they can locate the truth, which is that these stories are false (Doane and Hodges: 7).

As Gillian Harkins documents, throughout the late 1980s and 1990s the "memory wars" (after Frederick Crews' 1995 collection *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute*) were 'fought over the possibility of traumatic forgetting and delayed recall' (Harkins: 2009). Proponents of 'false memory syndrome' (such as Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters: 1994) believed that memories of incest could be "planted", especially within therapeutic environments, but also that memory itself was untrustworthy – easily diverted from the truth of an event. What false-memory stories conceived of as 'the malleability of memory' opened up recovery narratives to accusations of fictionality (Doane and Hodges: 7).

The tide-turn against recovered memory narratives also comprised an attack on the commoditisation of the incest narrative at a time when '[o]ffering and contesting incest therapy, writing and buying books about incest, constitute[ed] a lively market for largely middle-class consumers' (Doane and Hodges: 95). Texts such as Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, a collection of first-person accounts of childhood incest (originally published in 1978) came under fire on grounds of their apparently sensationalist packaging – in *Kiss Daddy Goodnight's* case, the cover 'market[s] incest as a fascinating, tabooed desire' with its kitsch image of little girls' faces partially obscured by black hearts (53). The same apparent imbrication of incestuous sex with soft pornography is connoted by *Incest's* promotional packaging. Whilst the sleeve notes present the text as a 'shattering psychological drama' wreaked by an act of 'ultimate transgression', the cover image depicts a woman's

painted nails, emerging from what appears to be either rumpled bed sheets or some kind of gathered cloak. Either reading of the image implies revelation, desire and seduction. Furthermore, the cover notes direct an erotic reading of the diary, stating that within its pages ‘one can find the genesis of [Nin’s] widely known erotic writings’, suggesting, by association that *Incest* and incest are erotic.

Publishers chose the title *Incest* from one of several that Nin gave to her diaries in the period covered by the published unexpurgated diary. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, writer and long-term Nin fan Erica Jong, suggested that the choice of title might have been a mistake, as it sounded ‘faintly commercial’ (Jong, 3-4). Whilst Jong doesn’t linger on this thought, her association of incest narratives with commercialism here speaks to a larger memoir backlash taking place in America during this period. The apparently sensationalist presentation of the diary affirmed the feeling, prevalent in some quarters of the American media at the time, that not only could incest be faked but that it was being faked for money.

Eakins sheds further light on the growing cynicism towards incest memoirs in his reading of Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss* which garnered criticism around the suspected financial motivations of its author. Using media responses alongside the publicity campaign that Harrison embarked upon, Eakin weighs up the accusation that Harrison was trying to “merchandise her pain” in writing *The Kiss* (quoting *New York Observer* journalist Warren St. John, 151). Eakin clearly finds some merit in readings of Harrison as mercenary but also sees these readings as part of the aforementioned backlash that also implicates the ‘Father Story’.

‘Grist for her literary mill’: reviewing the ‘Father Story’.

As an incest narrative, the undeniable literariness of the ‘Father Story’ rankled with American critics. Nin’s use of figurative language, ellipsis and, at times, an omnipresent narrator suggests a story that has been finely scripted. For many, this raised the question of the narrative’s authenticity as a life document. In fact, from the publication of the first unexpurgated diary onwards (*Henry and June* in 1986), there had been a critical backlash against Nin and her work, characterised by suggestions that she was a fake and that the diaries were fabrications. There is a larger conversation to be had about the ways in which conceptions of the “authentic” life document are culturally and temporally constructed that I will only be able to touch on in part here, but certainly Nin’s diaries were subject to the vicissitudes of changing attitudes towards life narratives between the 1970s and 1990s.

Whilst publishers increasingly marketed the unexpurgated diaries as literary texts (shown to great effect with the Penguin edition of *Henry and June* which features a black and white, naked photo of a truncated torso and gives no sense that the text is a diary), well-known critics such as *The New York Times*' Michiko Kakutani baulked at both the style and content of the unexpurgated diaries. Various critics read the 'Father Story' as sensationalist, pornographic and the last-ditch effort by Nin's estate to make some money from the salacious details of her life. Critical attacks on Nin aimed at the same spot: she was a nymphomaniac, a slut, a fabulist, deluded and, often, a bad writer.

The use of literary devices in the 'Father Story' such as an omniscient narrator, figurative language and extensive dialogue further marked it as a fictional rather than "true-life" incest narrative - despite its inclusion in a diary. Such devices challenged the idea that this was a narrative written from memory and suggested the taking of artistic licence. Critic Michiko Kakutani particularly zeroed in on the literariness of the narrative, referring to the 'Father Story' as having 'the heavy-breathing prose of a cheap romance novel' – a statement that both conveys the potentially arousing quality of the 'Father Story' and condemns it. She also suggests that there were literary motivations behind the event:

Nin's romance with her father, like so many of her affairs, also strikes the reader as a willful way of courting psychological havoc, a way of stirring up further melodrama in her life that might provide further grist for her literary mill. (1992)

The event becomes secondary to writing about it, a relationship that undermines its authenticity - for Kakutani at least – where authenticity here is signified by an event occurring spontaneously, rather than through premeditation. Whilst Kakutani doesn't call into question whether Nin really did sleep with her father or not (as other critics do), her review zeroes in on the sensationalism of the 'Father Story', implying that Nin lived her life in order to create literary affect. Indirectly, this review speaks to the false memory contingency's suspicions that incest narratives were being worked for profit – Nin's 'literary mill' suggesting nothing so much as an industrial approach to life-writing. Kakutani interprets this approach as resulting in both superficial experience and superficial writing; she wonders how Nin and her lovers 'could maintain any sort of spontaneity in their relationships' when Nin was so concerned to 'annotate her life', and concludes that Nin 'often seems so oddly detached from the consequences of her actions' (1993).

Other critics were similarly struck by the apparent lack of moral questioning displayed by Nin in the 'Father Story.' Writing for *The New York Times*, Bruce Bawer provides an abbreviated list of Nin's sexual partners and then asks '[d]id Nin feel guilty about

any of this?' – as if the answer should be “yes” but he suspects it might be “no.” Seeing no evidence of remorse, Bawer resolved this moral conundrum his own way. ‘In the end,’ he concludes, ‘one feels for this aging flirt [...] whose supposed "dream life" was in fact one of fear, guilt, loneliness, insecurity and fragmentation’ (1995). Failing to read the “appropriate” guilt, humiliation or regret in Nin’s narrative, Bawer expresses pity, ensuring that Nin is humiliated by default. Along with Kakutani, Bawer seizes on Nin’s apparent detachment from the events she describes, a detachment he interprets is performed both by her writing and her attitude.

Kakutani and Bawer’s responses tell us something about what is expected from the incest narrative. Both reviewers pick up on a stylistic detachment in Nin’s telling of the ‘Father Story’; Kakutani reads Nin’s writing as annotation, a kind of workmanlike process that results in “bad” writing, writing that he refers to as ‘cheap’, incommensurate with the emotional and psychological work he assumes was put in to produce it. Bawer describes the diary as ‘arid’ and characterised by ‘intellectual vacuity’ – terms different from Kakutani’s but which imply the same sense that Nin’s writing lacks any emotional or intellectual weight. Both reviews suggest that there is a right way to tell an incest narrative, in a manner that signifies remorse, moral interrogation, spontaneous recall, an emotional attachment to the events (but not “too” emotional – recall Kakutani’s accusation of melodrama in the ‘Father Story’), and in language that doesn’t suggest any literary ornamentation or desire to titillate the reader. It is the apparent constructedness of Nin’s narrative that irritates both reviewers, as this constructedness implies a premeditated - hence literary - narrative, rather than one spontaneously told. In this way, both Kakutani and Bawer’s reviews are touched by the anxieties generated from the false memory movement, anxieties around the reliability of memory, its potential to “reconstruct” events that never actually happened but especially the potential, as Doane and Hodges put it, that the incest narrative might dupe the reader into believing that fiction was fact.

Katha Pollit further articulates this position, when she reminds the reader that they cannot be sure that *Incest* is to be trusted:

how far should we trust the "unexpurgated" diary? After all, we were led to believe that the first series of diaries constituted an amazingly veracious document, in which a woman laid bare her inner life and the mysteries of womanhood. Now we are asked to accept “Henry and June” and "Incest" on the same grounds, although in important respects they falsify the earlier volumes. Like its predecessor, however, the new series consists merely of extracts of the voluminous original manuscript, so how do we know that it, too, is not a carefully crafted cut-and-paste job that omits whatever material undermines the image of Nin that her executors wish the world to see?

By speculating that *Incest* might be a ‘crafted cut-and-paste job’, Pollit also questions the ‘Father Story’s’ veracity as an incest narrative on the grounds of its potential construction and omissions. Unable to fully determine the truth of the narrative, Pollit cautions her readers not to take it too seriously: “‘Incest’ should probably be read as middling autobiographical fiction that sometimes rises to the level of first-rate pornography’ (1992).

Over several reviews of *Incest*, all of which, with the exception of Jong’s review, are largely unfavourable, a theme emerges. Critics attack Nin’s prose, often on grounds of its perceived excessiveness – it is florid, purple, heavy, sensationalist. Too much “work” has gone into it (also implying that there is a monetary motive behind the telling) and yet it is superficial, empty, or melodramatic. Nin’s motivations are almost always called into question: why did she sleep with her father? Was it to get back at him for his earlier abandonment? Was it so that she would have an event to sensationalise in writing? Was it to feel more “bohemian”? Joaquín Nin is only ever mentioned in brief, illustrating the extent to which he is curiously absent from his own patriography.

This failure to make a connection between the ‘Father Story’ and contemporary debates about the telling of incest can be attributed to a prevailing view of Nin as a relic from a bygone era. For example, Natasha Walter’s review of *Incest* describes Nin’s work as having a ‘glorious aura because she speaks from that age of innocence when adults still talked about the utter bliss of a kiss, the supreme otherness of sex’ (1993). Walter’s falsely nostalgic reading of Nin (and her “age”) not only misses the complexity of Nin’s agency within the ‘Father Story’ but also ignores the relevance of the narrative to contemporary debates: its capacity to bring to the fore the cultural assumptions around the incest narrative.

Obviously mediated, precariously cast somewhere between a memory and a work of fiction, and resistant to any clear attribution of blame, trauma or victimhood, the ‘Father Story’ is not a recovery narrative. Nor can it easily be read as a feminist account where Nin overthrows the patriarchal oppressor in order to lay claim to self-articulated desire and agency. It problematizes genre boundaries in such a way as to suggest that the incest memoir, romance novel and erotic short story push up against each other as forms in pleasurable yet troubling ways. That is, the ‘Father Story’ not only refuses to obviously identify what “kind” of incest narrative it is, but undoes the boundary between fact and fiction such that it is impossible to tell whether the ‘Father Story’ is a real-life account, a sexual fantasy, a traumatised testimony or a patriographical *aide memoire*.

Read in these terms, we can conclude that the critical irritation that the ‘Father Story’

generated in 1992 was symptomatic of a burgeoning anxiety to do with the incest memoir's provenance, cultural capital and affective charge, an anxiety that has much to do with the ways in which incest narratives, according to Harkins, 'can produce a pleasurable frisson' in their readers because of the ways they engender kinds of contact with 'cultural strictures' (xii). Because of her existing reputation as a sexually profligate, outré (and dead) public figure, Nin functioned conveniently as a placeholder for much of this anxiety. In a climate where, according to Gillian Harkins, there was 'a voracious interest in consuming stories of incestuous trauma' coupled with 'an equally voracious interest in persecuting perpetrators of sexual abuse' the 'Father Story' turned readers, uncomfortably, to examine their own interest (xiii).

Refusing to identify obviously as a victim in the 'Father Story', Nin was read as a nymphomaniac. Appearing too literary for a testimony, the 'Father Story' was read as a fabrication. As a father story, Nin's narrative rendered the father suspect: feminine, seductive, sexually predatory and strangely absent from his own patriography. As a filiography, it mobilised America's worst fears, figuring the daughter as sexually aware, willfully articulate and neither victimized nor empowered by her incest narrative. The 'Father Story's' resistance to generic positioning revealed the porousness of the boundaries that divided the recovered from the false memory movements and, to a large extent, revealed the shared concerns of these movements which often circled around questions of the fictionality of the incest text. Furthermore, what I have referred to as the 'Father's Story' genre trouble exposed the proximity of the incest narrative to other literary forms in ways that deeply problematized cultural investment in the "real event" of incest. If *Incest* could not be trusted, then could incest? Read this way, the 'Father Story' is re-positioned, critically, as a text that refuses to lie down and do our bidding.

Notes.

[1] I focus on the American context here, because this is where Nin's work, historically, has been most widely read.

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