

The Father Figure in Tadeusz Kantor's Work

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One of the main areas of memory exploited by Tadeusz Kantor is that of his youth, his family, his perceptions of the world as a boy, and, particularly, the blurred image of the absent father. Tadeusz was the second child of Helena Berger and Marian Kantor, a schoolmaster, but Marian never returned after leaving with the Second Division of the Polish Legion to fight in World War I.

The fact that his father never returned is one of the major ambiguities of Kantor's work. This father, reported to be missing in action, was portrayed in a negative manner in Kantor's early autobiographical or personal works. By personal, I mean the works derived from his personal memories, as opposed to, for instance, his productions of plays by Witkacy.

In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, the father is a soldier standing among identical others. With his wan face, wild eyes, and mechanical gestures, he is an obedient puppet uttering inarticulate groans, a mannequin with no will of his own, a marionette manipulated by events and by his family. Without a word of protest, he follows the movements of the other soldiers, bending to the gestures imposed on them by the priest. He allows his young wife to be brutalized and raped. His only real existence seems to be in the photograph where he is pictured standing in the midst of those killed in battle.

This image of a hero who was killed for his country, one of many men who had bravely defended the rebirth of Poland after a century and a half of non-existence, quite amazed Kantor's Polish audiences. Hero worship, the reverence for liberating soldiers, is so powerful in the national conscience that this lack of respect was deeply resented. If such derision was part of Kantor's deliberate will to show the inhumanity of the slaughter of World War I, it also reflected the only memory the child has of his father, described in "Imprints:"

His imprint

My eyes could not look high enough,

so there are only his

b o o t s ,

which are knee high.

My sensitive ear would catch

incomprehensible

curses of the father and

his strange walking patter:

one two, one two. . . .

Nobody else walked like this.¹

Only in the following works would the spectator receive further information; this father who had not come back from war did not die a hero. He left the army in December 1922, but instead of returning home, he settled in Silesia for a few years before making his way back to Tarnów.

And so, throughout his childhood, the young Tadeusz Kantor—adored by his mother and remaining devoted to her until death—only heard of his father in a negative sense. And it was his mother's uncle, a priest, who welcomed the family by the coexistence of the two Polish religious communities—Jewish and Catholic. This would be an experience marked by attraction, passion, and clashes known not only by the village of Wielopole, but by the majority of Poland at this time.

Kantor's family on his maternal side were fervent Catholics who gave the child numerous religious references and icons that followed him throughout his life. These religious motifs can be found in various forms in many of his essays (including the aforementioned "Imprints") with such titles as "The Cross," "The Cemetery," and "Kneeling." And yet the Jewish community in Wielopole claimed Kantor's father although the man was not a believer. During a conversation with me in 1989 in Galerie de France, a print gallery in Paris, Kantor remembered being amazed when the Jewish children would tell him, "You must play with us since your father is a Jew." Despite this absent father, whose real identity was then cultureless and draped in mystery, the child was a careful observer of what took place in his village where "in the town square stood a little shrine dedicated to one of the saints where faithful Catholics gathered, and a well at which, usually in the full moon, Jewish weddings took place. On the one side of the square, there was a church, a presbytery, and a cemetery; on the other side, a synagogue, a few narrow Jewish streets, and another cemetery. Both sides lived in agreeable symbiosis. Spectacular Catholic ceremonies, processions, flags, bright folk costumes, and the peasants were on the one side. On the other side of the town square, there were mysterious rites, fantastic songs and prayers, hats made of foxes, candelabra, rabbis, and crying babies. Beyond its daily life, this small, silent town was turned towards eternity."²

Throughout his work, these two cultural and religious forces along with their rites and symbols, their taboos and mysteries, constantly interacted to form one fundamental set of themes basic to Kantor's work: that of the Beyond. And the more the author revealed his personality in his work, the more important the father figure, with its connotations and complex transformation, became.

Kantor's perception of his family, of each member's respective place, and of his father's character, was forever altered by a significant event. On June 2, 1984, he was invited to Będzin where the Zagłębie Museum had organized the official conference dedicated to the memory of Marian Kantor-Mirski. There he discovered a radically different image of his father: the valorous soldier decorated with the "Cross of Merit" (Krzyż Waleczny) and the "French Order of Victory," and the historian, a keen ethnologist who authored numerous papers and articles about the history of Silesia. His contribution to the demonstration of

Silesia's Slavonic origins was not appreciated by the Germans, nor was his role in the resistance, which led to his arrest and confinement at Auschwitz, where he died April 1, 1942. As his friend Maria Krasicka later told me, Tadeusz Kantor emerged from this conference quite shattered, saying, "Why did I only get evil reports of him?"

Kantor's imagination was shaped by what he knew of his father, and in *I Shall Never Return* the appearance of Odysseus marked a change in the identity of the characters. Although the very choice of Wyspiański's work, *The Return of Odysseus*, staged underground by Kantor in 1944, could be explained primarily by its historical context, he nevertheless portrayed a father unable to come back home and speak to his family without breeding hatred and destruction. And it was precisely this return that Kantor used again in *I Shall Never Return*.

As Kantor wrote in his manifesto, this show was an encounter with ghosts or people from Kantor's past who were supposed to meet with him at this inn at the crossroads of time. Odysseus came back and sat at the table opposite the author/Kantor trying to resume a dialogue that had been impossible in 1944 when he first returned. Wyspiański's Odysseus, a proud, brutal hero, a killer in the war, did not know how to address his fragile son, humiliated by his mother's suitors; he had only one answer: murder. But now, in this shabby inn, Odysseus, back from the Beyond to meet his son, appeared as a human wreckage, coarsely clothed by an Army that decided his fate. He had but a few moments of reprieve before suffering *rigor mortis* again. As we are reminded by the guttural voice of the loudspeaker: "Odysseus is dead." This attempt to make contact ends in failure, because "nobody returns alive to the country of their youth."

During this period of life, Kantor mentioned a "real" meeting he had with his father that supposedly took place in the 1930s. But in Kantor's description, the image of the father, playing every musical instrument while surrounded by a circle of prostitutes, merged with that of Bruno Schulz's omniscient father and Kantor's wishes that what he divulged should not be exploited. So the identity of the father remained blurred, and this issue was clearly expressed during the course of rehearsals for *Today Is My Birthday*.

Indeed, the Janicki brothers, who are twins, embody this split personality rendered by the pursuit between the father sitting at the family table, convinced that he is the genuine father, and his double who pursues him ruthlessly. This quest for the real self, this questioning of the ownership of one's own being, of the appearance and reality of social existence, was carefully studied by Kantor on stage, both in gesture and in word. The father's cry of anguish: "You have my face. You have taken my face. Give me my face back," followed later by the terrifying realization that "He is me! What about me then? I cannot exist any longer" (no doubt a reference to Alexander Blok's *The Puppet Booth*) exposes in a cruel, terse manner the fragility of the image impressed on others, the importance of chance in the perception of existence, and the restricted power man has on what he bequeaths to posterity, on what other people will remember and

understand about him. This situation is more serious than amnesia, for the theft of a face results in complete deprivation. The human being becomes nothing. His past not only eludes him but has been stolen, lived, and fulfilled by somebody else. Denied his previous existence, he cannot recreate himself. If it is possible to fill in an empty space of memory, to fashion an imaginary past equal to one's most beautiful dreams and that no confrontation with reality will ever disturb, the project of building a new past would be useless after one's double has become the reflective keeper of the old past and its undisputed facts. The essential question for the artist, about the meaning and the fate of his work, is also that of the man pondering his destiny in the Beyond and the imprint he has left among the living.

From childhood to adulthood, the identity of the father—fragmentary, confused, and uncertain—became part of Kantor's quest, with his constant questioning about his place in the memory of a human being, about his place in a culture linked to the birth of "Europe" in the middle of a humanist yet barbaric century.

Notes

1. Tadeusz Kantor, "Imprints," *Silent Night in A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990* edited and translated by Michal Kobialka (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1993) 183.

2. Wiesław Borowski, *Kantor* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982) 18-19.