

**Reconstructing Mother—The Myth and the Real  
Autobiographical Texts by  
Elisabeth Langgässer und Cordelia Edvardson**

Cordelia Edvardson ist die Tochter von Elisabeth Langgässer,  
die als Kind aufgrund ihrer jüdischen Eltern  
nach Theresienstadt und Auschwitz verschleppt wurde.

Der Romane  
*Gebranntes Kind scheut das Feuer* von Edvardson  
und  
Texte von Langgässer  
reflektieren eine komplizierte Mutter-Tochter-Beziehung,  
die von der faschistischen Regierung bedroht war.

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The tragic relationship of the writer Elisabeth Langgässer and her daughter Cordelia Edvardson is scarred by a mother/daughter conflict of historic dimension. Both wrote autobiographical works that in very different ways take a position against the mystification of the mother image during the Hitler era. Their works reflect both the cultural trends and the effects of the social and political conditions of the time on the fate of the individual.

There has always existed a connection between mother/daughter relationships and the fatherland, in the past as much as today. The notion that fascist elements lurk in democracies and the realization that gender plays a role in producing and reproducing collaborators in crime has expanded into a special discourse.<sup>1</sup> Shortly before the unification of Germany in 1990, Christa Wolf viewed the situation in the German Democratic Republic by explicitly referring to gender:

Now politicians and economists are dominant. The political parties are once more powerful. . . . Granted, all of them, politicians, business managers, and party functionaries, need a fatherland for their enterprises. So far, a motherland is not in sight.”

(Das Wort haben jetzt die Politiker und die Wirtschaftsleute. Das Wort haben wieder die Parteien. . . . Sie alle—Politiker, Wirtschaftsmanager, Parteifunktionäre—brauchen für ihre Unternehmungen ein Vaterland, das sehe ich ein. Ein Mutterland ist, wie bisher, nicht in Sicht.) (*Im Dialog*, 16–17)<sup>2</sup>

Wolf uses “fatherland” as a negative term. It becomes a gendered concept shaped by the usual alliance of politics and economics from which women are excluded. Women as historical subjects and participants have also been remarkably absent in the two recent debates about the German past in the Federal Republic: the West German *Historikerstreit* (German historian’s controversy), which erupted in 1986, and the current debate about the GDR’s legacy of National Socialism. In the public debates political systems and gender are separated; the latter usually appears under the rubric of “women’s problems.” Many women seem to have internalized this division as well: there is little action by women in the political arena or in the media to address such one-sidedness.

Change occurs at a snail’s pace. Virginia Woolf had already noted in 1936 that systematic exclusion of women from the cultural, political, and economic institutions makes even a democratic society such as Britain profoundly undemocratic for women (*Three Guineas*). Woolf noted that the middle-class family reproduces gendered subjects within the family structure as well as through the power structure of the public world. Both women and men collaborate to perpetuate this system. Women usually do so either because they have consciously or unconsciously internalized their assigned role for security’s sake or because their voices are not heard. For Woolf it is this family situation that is of prime importance for the development of fascism. It should be noted that Woolf’s findings were not meant to obfuscate the particularly pernicious form that fascism assumed in Germany and that brought suffering to Langgässer and Edvardson. Yet, we must be vigilant about other potential fascisms now and in the future. Woolf’s argument that fascism vitally depends on a patriarchal notion of gender is still very much ignored.

What then is the “motherland” Christa Wolf is looking for? At this point it is a utopian concept that Wolf explores in her writings which is still very much a *Kein Ort Nirgends* (*No Place Nowhere*), to borrow the title of one of her texts. But more women’s voices are being heard today, and a new discourse on gender and the fatherland as well as an exploration of the power and weakness of mothers in the fatherland is growing, at least among writers. Women writers of this century are asking related questions in an individualized manner. Often, these questions are dealt with in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts that either question the father or look for a mother. This can be an individual mother, a universal, primeval mother, or a mother who is not like the patriarchal collaborative one. The

latter constitutes a new model of a mother who can convey identity to a daughter alienated from her fatherland. However, she faces a dilemma: either she continues to find herself excluded, or if she is included, she becomes a collaborator.

The first of the two texts under discussion attempts an analysis of the concept of the primeval mother. The second shows a daughter caught up in the maelstrom of fascist consequences, and, after losing a fatherland, attempting to come to terms with the conflicting images of her own mother.

Elisabeth Langgässer (1899–1950) and her daughter Cordelia Edvardson (1929– ) authored autobiographical texts which enter a new mother-daughter discourse that admits conflict. Langgässer's text, *Proserpina* (1933), is directed against a narrow, constricting mother image prevalent in the dominant discourse during both the Weimar Republic and the Hitler era. Edvardson's *Gebranntes Kind sucht das Feuer* (1989) (*Burnt Child Seeks out the Fire*) shows a daughter whose societal values have been shattered together with her mother image, and who attempts to come to terms with the consequences of that loss. In a shocking way their works reflect the influence of social and political circumstances on the fate of individual women.

Langgässer's novel was completed around 1929, the year her daughter was born. At that time women professionals had made progress: there were 2,500 women physicians, 300 women lawyers, and even a few dozen women professors and judges in Germany (Koonz, 45). The "New Woman" wanted to realize her potential by working outside the house and by discarding Wilhelmian strictures regarding sexuality. However, as critic Claudia Koonz reminds us in her book *Mothers in the Fatherland* (1987), no widespread change took place and a majority of women regarded the new images with skepticism and continued to emulate traditional models.

Langgässer, however, like many women artists of her time, belonged to the avant-garde. Partially due to her multiethnic background—her mother was Jewish but she grew up Catholic—she had become alerted to a crisis in the traditional systems of belief. Her Catholicism was always a very personal one. As a school teacher she had entered professional life very early; but because she gave birth to an illegitimate child, Cordelia (whose Jewish father was married to someone else), she lost her position as a teacher. As a nontraditional mother she was censured immediately. She then moved from her home town in the Rhine area (Rheinzabern, close to Alzey) to the center of action, Berlin, in 1929. As a self-employed writer she belonged to the periphery of a group of women authors who were expressing and publicizing emancipatory ideas. Langgässer had barely turned twenty when women were granted the vote and thus felt comfortable being an emancipated woman.

Although motherhood was not rejected in novels written by emancipated women writers of the time, their reevaluation of women's roles and potentials spelled danger for the conservative and fascist models that followed. The basis of

these models was to socialize girls first and foremost for their task as mothers. The prevalent resistance to a new image of women in the late twenties and thirties can be illustrated by a study published in 1938 by Irmgard Schüttrumpf about the mother-child problem in the German women's novel during the time of the women's movement. Schüttrumpf makes an ideologically motivated attack against emancipated women writers, thereby reflecting the philosophy of the Third Reich. Her study focuses on novels written between 1880 and 1920 by authors close to the women's movement. The idea of an independent mother who raises her daughters independently for a new and freer society—as Langgässer did—is criticized and contrasted with a natural “timeless, eternal womanhood” (*zeitloses, ewiges Frauentum*). Without giving any sources or explanations, Schüttrumpf argues in terms of this conventional essentialism—which does not have to be proven—in favor of a universal womanhood representing the “genuine nature” (*das echte Wesen*) of women. Needless to say, it includes all traditional feminine characteristics, such as natural readiness for service and passivity. The avant-garde writers are reproached for not including this true essence of womanhood in their novels. Consequently, “aesthetic failure” (*dichterisches Versagen*; 8) is attributed to them, a judgment indicative of totalitarian political procedure, which values artistic production according to the prevailing ideology. It also becomes obvious that the powers of the patriarchy are based on gender differences: for instance, Schüttrumpf concludes that the right to work, demanded by “modern” woman, presents a conflict with “motherhood.” She further criticizes that the women in these novels problematize their own existence (10). Writers such as Clara Viebig, Gabriele Reuter, Ilse Frapan, Helene Böhlau are accused of falsifying womanhood because, supposedly, their feminine blood is secretly fighting the emancipatory movement. Contrary to the perception of these writers, Schüttrumpf claims that women have a “yearning for dedication and self-sacrifice” (*zu Hingabe und Selbstaufgabe drängen*; 20). The aim of such an ideology is transparent. There are two standards: one privileging men and one denying rights to women. When Schüttrumpf speaks of “the ill-fated power of the intellect, which destroys feeling” (*der unseligen Macht des gefühlszerstörenden Intellektes*), she insidiously applies it only to women. And among people who desire choices in building their identity, it is only the woman who “does not notice that in reality she is a slave of her own personality illusion” (*merkt nicht, daß sie in Wirklichkeit Sklavin ihres Persönlichkeitswahnes ist*). A few of the authors are even reproached for favoring “a perversion of feminine life and feminine soul” (*Entartung weiblichen Lebens und weiblicher Seele*; 37) in their works. It does not surprise us that the study finds this kind of literary trend especially among Jewish women writers. Schüttrumpf uses unsubstantiated essentialism as a racist and sexist weapon.

The tendencies of the women's movement and the countertendencies of fascism intersected as Langgässer wrote *Proserpina*, in which she reflected on her own childhood. In 1929, three generations of women—her mother, herself, and her illegitimate daughter—lived together. Before her brother took over as provider, Langgässer earned a living for all of them as an instructor of pedagogy and methodology at a *soziale Frauenschule* (social women's school). She also produced literary works and advertising texts. Juggling her artistic interests, her profession, the demands of her little daughter, and her strong-minded mother, the lifestyle of this single mother ran counter to the political ideologies discussed above.

The new, uncertain circumstances of Langgässer as modern daughter invite questions that a mother representing the patriarchal model cannot answer. Thus, Langgässer the writer creates a modern version of the ancient Persephone/Demeter myth, describing it in a dark, romantically enriched, surrealistic dream language—a difficult medium for modern readers. Tapping into the Roman heritage of her native Rhein area she uses the Roman name Proserpina for the primeval mythical daughter. But, she also puts Jung's archetypes onto a modern stage decorated with Christian symbols. The acting figures of the novel change in a protean fashion and the events have the quality of a Freudian dream, dreamt by the protagonist. The author sends a new Proserpina in search of a missing mother. The novel makes it clear that Langgässer, like many other contemporary writers, suffered from the mechanistic life style in the industrial age where the concept of "mother" had become a stereotype. She wrote within the framework of the modernist tradition as she attempted to revitalize empty myths through which women might again be a part of a larger collective existence. While her equation mother = nature leads her into an essentializing trap, she never falls into it, because she links the concepts she explores to women's potentials rather than essentials.

Langgässer incorporates her own childhood memories symbolically. Proserpina, the cosmic daughter, feels motherless, cut off from her origins. With her fertile, creative mind, she finds that her own birth mother, who has internalized the humdrum existence of everyday life, cannot be a role model. Not even her mother's milk agrees with the child. She was ill during most of her early childhood and compensated for real experiences with stories and fantasies. The writer seems to examine the resulting emotional deficit by exploring possibilities of a stronger and more encompassing mother image. The recreation of her own childhood yields a rich imagery because her home environment in the Rhine River area is endowed with layers of ancient artifacts and memories. After all, Romans lived there at the time when the original Proserpina was worshipped. History is never past, it lies underfoot, underground, in the unconscious. Time and space constraints disappear in Langgässer's narrative style. History is no longer linear. The temporal, surface level

of order in the child's environment and its societal dictates are challenged. The novel also reflects the post-World War I mentality of many Germans who mourned the destruction of their value systems and questioned progress. As nature, culture, and history merge, the novel shows that the past still exerts a powerful influence on the present.

When Proserpina is finally permitted to leave her bed and go out at least into the house garden, she experiences real nature as threatening. Her imagination populates the environment with nature spirits, which become embodied. They merge with real people around her who become larger than life and in turn grow into mythical and Christian symbols. The girl feels lured into the depth of "Mother Nature" by way of a seemingly cultivated garden, a location that hides the realm of death, opulent and terrifying. Her inner and the outer world merge. It is doubtless her name that prompts the child to internalize the Roman myth of Proserpina, the eternal daughter, and her mother Ceres, also worshipped as Mother Nature, and to relive it in a new way. This kind of historical and ahistorical simultaneity prevents the development of a plot line. Through the sacrifice of such a narrative Langgässer succeeds in stylistically exploring those hidden areas of women's separate existence that would be destroyed by a linear story.

Contrary to the ancient myth, Langgässer creates a Proserpina who is not protected by her mother. A frightening side of the mother's power is expressed when the narrator laconically asserts that "all the mother goddesses are at the same time rulers of the underworld" (*die Muttergöttinnen sind alle zugleich Herrscherinnen der Unterwelt*; 22).<sup>3</sup> In the late Greek version of the myth, Proserpina's predecessor, Persephone, is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter (also called Mother Earth). With the consent of her father, Zeus, Persephone is raped by her own uncle, the god Hades, and abducted by him to the underworld. This happens as Persephone is about to pick a flower in a meadow. Since this flower is a narcissus the myth implies that the girl is about to develop a subjective identity based on her own reflection. Yet, this mustn't take place in a patriarchy where women remain objects, and thus the male gods interfere by taking Persephone to the "other" world, the underworld. Only when Demeter, in her raging pain, devastates all life on earth is Zeus forced to return the daughter. Yet the mother cannot get her back completely because she ate of a pomegranate in Hades. This is an early parallel to Eve's eating the apple. The Persephone myth confirms that the sexuality of women was already seen in connection with the dark forces (which in Christianity became sin), despite the fact that the girl was a rape victim. This early version is even more unsettling than the biblical one because Persephone was not warned about eating of the pomegranate and did not know the consequences. Nevertheless, she is being sent to death again and again for part of the year. Only through the sacrifice of the innocent daughter can life continue on earth.

The allusion to this myth lends Langgässer's novel a subtext that implies the daughter's role as victim. She rewrites this element of the myth in an individualistic and modernist way to express the daughter's powerlessness, as she attempts to deal with her own inner drives of early adolescence, and as she yearns to participate in the motherly powers of nature to satisfy those undefined desires.

Langgässer tentatively examines a symbolism imbued with patriarchal overtones in which the power of the mother is connected with the dark, destructive forces of nature and not to a *philotas*, that is, the tenderness of a humanizing eros, which the feminist Irigaray found in ancient mother-daughter myths. Langgässer's vision of the mythical mother touches on the concept of the "große Mutter" (great mother), one of Eric Neumann's and Carl Jung's archetypes, whose negative powers, according to these psychologists, are threatening the individual and collective psyche of the Western world. Langgässer's novel boldly questions the truth-value of such allegations.

The narrator constructs a collage of a super-mother-triad which combines erotic, reproductive, and nurturing elements, and which rules over life and death. This construction takes place in the imagination of the daughter and constitutes a new variant of Demeter, who represented the triad of young woman, mother, and old crone in early myth. Langgässer uncovers deep layers of that complex and elusive image of "mother" and adds Christian spirituality as well as aspects of real women's lives. She multiplies this triad so that each entity fans out into three additional mythical women: Eve/Aphrodite/Selene, Ceres/Maria/Hecate, Witch/Wise Woman/Mother Nature. All three are connected to birth, love, and death. Together they are powerful. Earlier mother myths, in which goddesses were drawn with positive and life-giving traits, flow into Langgässer's novel—for instance the pre-patriarchal myths rediscovered by Bachofen and later by feminists such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and Heide Göttner-Abendroth. In some contemporary feminist discourses Demeter is recognized as a primeval goddess who later on incorporated other goddesses celebrated in the Eleusinian mysteries which were inaugurated between 1400 and 1100 B.C. Adrienne Rich notes: "The real meaning of the mysteries was this reintegration of death and birth, at a time, when patriarchal splitting may have seemed to sever them entirely" (238–239). After two thousand years of such division the daughter in Langgässer's novel must piece together a fragmented mother image.

On the surface level the three multiple mother figures are real women who populate the daily life of the child. In the girl's imagination they grow in complexity. The first mother, her birth mother, extends care to the daughter in a physical sense. For the girl she becomes Ceres, symbol of societal morals and guardian of the family. She also appears to her as the Catholic Mary, the intermediary bringing salvation, and Selene, heathen moon and birth goddess. These three images conflate in



this mother image of the child's vision; but she develops no deeper tie to her birth mother. The presence of the sober housewife does not satisfy the imagination of the child, and she develops a feeling of abandonment. On this level of civilized existence in the house of her mother she feels as if she were in the underworld, which to her means "the winter sleep of obedience, which would have saved her in cold and darkness from death" (*der Winterschlaf des Gehorsams, der sie in Kälte und Finsternis vor dem Tode bewahrt hätte*; 98). However, she opts for disobedience and thus escapes this type of underworld constituted by a pre-programmed existence.

The second real mother figure is a beautiful woman, a young servant who takes care of the girl in the mother's absence. Through her she learns about the effect of physical attraction. Aphrodite is personified in her. Inspired by this image, the novel's Proserpina eats a pomegranate just like her mythical predecessor, and for the first time she is able to differentiate between what her culture calls "good" and "evil" (98). The underworld is here represented by the frightening first erotic sensations, which irrationally seek to find expression and liberation in uncomprehended desires but clash with society's taboos. The tenderness of Aphrodite of which Irigaray speaks and which humanizes Eros, is evident in the interaction of the girl and the second mother figure. Yet for the women Irigaray's *philotas* is destroyed by the superior place man has in the story and in the patriarchy.

The third mother figure is an old, wise woman, a witch-like gardener, whom the child visits often, and who seems to control the powers of nature. She personifies the old crone, the witch, Hecate, or Mother Nature. This mother image teaches Proserpina that power can be exercised through an individual strong will, through action, intuition, and imagination. Thus, a link between woman's potential for physical as well as mental reproduction is recognized. In her creative powers, the wise woman seems to be the narrator's model for her own creative writing. The realm of the mighty, magical mother is depicted as the dangerous underworld where patriarchal conscience is absent, and where power over life and death can be used at will. This is the area Langgässer seems to be most interested in as an emancipated woman; it is also the area closed to women and guarded by patriarchal taboos, which are expressed by symbols of Catholicism with which Langgässer struggles here but later turns to increasingly.

In the second, revised version of the novel *Proserpina, Welt eines Kindes* (1933) (*Proserpina, World of a Child*, published before the original version), the mother image is toned down in its terrifying features. Perhaps it was a necessary procedure to assure publication at a time when a stereotypical ideal mother was dominating the media. Langgässer's explorations of mother-daughter power are in opposition to the image of the idealized, highly decorated mother with seven children promoted by the National Socialists. In the original version of 1929, which was published first in 1949 with the subtitle *Eine Kindheitsmythe (A Childhood Myth)*, the

mother image contains a destructive, even death-bringing component, as well as aspects of witchcraft, elements from the realm of ghosts, and magic. Also, the real mother is more often present, and as a consequence, the conflict is more sharply delineated. Heidi Margrit Müller's study of the differences between the two versions is quite revealing in this respect. As Langgässer conceded later, she preferred the first version, which she was able to publish only after the downfall of the Third Reich. During the years of Nazi rule she had been forbidden to publish any of her works or to write at all.

In the first version of the book *Proserpina* dares to practice her newly discovered power for the first time when a young male gardener, who appears to her as Pan, awakens her sensuality and at the same time her feelings of jealousy and revenge. The girl "plays" the role of the terrible mother herself; she becomes the goddess of the underworld who is caught in destructive chaos. Brutally she dismembers her doll, which resembles her beautiful and envied rival in love. The death of a cat seems to be her doing as well. These images convey a vitality of the individual that diminishes the negative aspects of her groping attempts to handle power for her own desires. The daughter must seek an affirmation of her own identity, no matter what the consequences might be.

The three motherly images created by Langgässer redefine motherhood radically. It is no longer expressed by the glorified image of a "self-less" housewife and mother collaborating with the patriarchy but by the enormous power resting in all women and consisting of the ability to desire, produce, and destroy. Langgässer not only goes beyond draping psychological processes with mythical images: she explores the role of language as well. The child *Proserpina* not only experiences unknown motherly powers through the enticement of nature around her, the narrator notices a second entrapment: "however, a second rapture was more dangerous and much deeper, because it fell unnoticed through non-violent language" (doch war eine zweite Entrückung gefährlicher und auch tiefer, weil es unbemerkt durch die gewaltlose Sprache fiel; 74). By entrapment she refers to the lure of the other, the mother's realm. Human language "born of water and spirit" (aus Wasser und Geist geboren; 95), she maintains, belongs to the world of the father, but since the father of the story, in his incarnation as *Evöe*, turns out to be a god of the underworld and a messenger of *Proserpina's* mother, language and spirit are emanating from the motherly forces as well. Langgässer is here clearly undermining the Freudian concept of the "phallic woman" who threatens but is always part of the patriarchal system. In *Proserpina*, on the other hand, the spiritual father is nothing but an emissary of a matriarchal system. Since Langgässer is deeply positioned in Christian alternatives, she has the daughter eventually blame herself for the death of her beloved father, although he dies of an incurable illness toward the end of the novel. This self-blame reflects one of

Freud's early observations that the daughter must be sacrificed if the father is to live, that is, if patriarchy is to continue.<sup>4</sup> The girl blames herself because she should have died, not he. Langgässer, one of the writers trying to look beyond dualism, touches upon the question what impact the death of the father and the reemergence of the matriarchal goddesses might have on her time. But she cannot come to a conclusion, since her society is still a very traditional one. The narrator tells us that mother and daughter disappear to an unknown place after the death of the father as if they, too, have ceased to exist as individuals. Is the combined disappearance of mother and daughter from time and space to be understood as an interpersonal fulfillment, in which conflicts have disappeared? Or is it no longer possible to continue the search through language, the instrument of the father? The author leaves this question open.

Langgässer felt the pulse of her times, in which the true essence of origin was still accepted without question and new myths backed up these claims (Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, "justifying" inhumanity to achieve Aryan purity, had already been written). The bipolar division of spirit and nature, which had prevailed up to then in the Western world, had given way to a carefully chosen undefined mixture, which exploited individual feeling and thought for political purposes. The modern Proserpina is a daughter, whose sacrifice for a male society is absurd. Actually, there is nothing to save any more.

While Langgässer's story stops at puberty, the main part of her daughter's novel *Gebranntes Kind sucht das Feuer* (1986) (*Burnt Child Seeks out the Fire*) begins at this time. The two novels, written before and after World War II, frame the worst time in German history. Edvardson who experienced true abandonment wrote her book out of a need to reconstruct the image of a mother and in so doing achieve a more secure identity. The plot is quickly summarized. The fourteen-year-old Cordelia is torn from her parents by the Nazis, forced to work as a nurse and later taken to Auschwitz. At the end of the war she is released to Sweden, where she recovers only slowly from a severe illness. She lives there with foster parents, later marries and raises children of her own. The last, brief paragraph of her book deals with her emigration to Israel. Unlike her mother, she uses real names in her recollections, but distances herself, just as Langgässer did, from her own childhood identity by choosing to write in the third person singular. In a retrospective view of her early childhood Cordelia vividly remembers a certain feeling of being different, a knowledge about a special task she had to perform for her mother. The name Proserpina had always been familiar to her. She describes a symbiotic existence, in which the roles of mother and daughter were inverted at times. The child seeks protection in the arms of her mother,

and the mother is in the arms of the child, because the guiltless, innocent child is the refuge of the mother, her salvation and her sacrificial lamb. Who nursed whom? Who

sent Proserpina out to pick flowers which drew their vital powers from the earth of the realm of the dead?

(und die Mutter an der Brust des Kindes, denn das schuldlose, unschuldige Kind ist the Zuflucht der Mutter, ihre Rettung, und ihr Opferlamm. Wer stillte wen? Wer sandte Proserpina aus, Blumen zu pflücken, die ihre Lebenskraft aus der Erde des Totenreichs sogen?)(58)

Cordelia tells her readers that she had never read her mother's Proserpina novel. It hadn't been necessary, the narrator states, as the message for the daughter had been received much earlier. For her, the topic of the "great mother" is no longer an intellectual game, as it was for her mother, but it becomes reality. The grown-up narrator of *Gebanntes Kind sucht das Feuer* (*Burnt Child Seeks out the Fire*) reflects that it had always been understood that she, as daughter, had to sacrifice herself. As a fourteen-year-old she was ready to save her mother. Without a second thought she rendered a fatal signature, which assured her mother's freedom but precipitated her own transport into Hitler's death camps. The deportation of the child was ordered because Cordelia was three-quarters Jewish. Her mother, who was only half-Jewish and was now married to a non-Jew, and her younger children from this marriage, were safe from the clutches of Hitler's race police. In an attempt to protect her eldest daughter, Langgässer had arranged an adoption by a non-Jewish couple. This was a punishable act and was discovered. The Nazi officials assailed the bond of trust between mother and daughter by manipulating young Cordelia with the threat that her mother would be incarcerated for her felony if she, Cordelia, would not wear the yellow star identifying her as Jewish. Cordelia signed without hesitation, thus abdicating her rights as a citizen.<sup>5</sup> She had internalized the mythic lesson of the primeval Proserpina; she must sacrifice herself for her mother. When she is together with her mother, life and death are one and the same for her: "Oh yes, to be allowed to sleep, protected, gently, in the womb of death, of my mother" (O ja, schlafen zu dürfen, geborgen und sanft, im Schoß des Todes, der Mutter; 17).

Edvardson's book explores the consequences of her childhood socialization in a hostile, racist environment. She reports that she spent the beginning of her childhood without a father, and in a close symbiosis with her mother whom she practically deified. She whimsically considered a father as dispensable as owning an elephant or swallowing cod liver oil. Early on she had been conscious of her special status. She knew, she would never wear "the crown of a blue eyed princess but the crown of thorns of suffering." She had absorbed the amalgam of her mother's myths early: she was Proserpina and she was also the child Jesus. Her mother merged with the queen of heaven. When the threatening danger of a Nazi visit had once again passed, the child felt as if

the Mother of God (had) . . . hidden her under her sky blue coat, decorated with stars, or perhaps it had been the mother of the girl after all, who, with her magic powers, had thrown a cloak of invisibility over the daughter . . .

(Die Mutter Gottes (hatte) . . . sie unter ihrem himmelblauen, sternenbesetzten Mantel verborgen, oder vielleicht war es ja die Mutter des Mädchens gewesen, die mit ihren Zauberkünsten eine Tarnkappe über die Tochter . . . geworfen hatte . . .) (58)

In the proximity of her mother she didn't fear anything, not even the Nazi threat: "As long as the girl stayed inside the protective jurisdiction of her mother's magic, there was no real danger. Death no longer frightened her." (Solange sich das Mädchen im schützenden Bannkreis der Beschwörungen ihrer Mutter hielt, drohte ihr keine ernste Gefahr. Der Tod schreckte sie nicht länger; 33). She was ready to do everything for her mother. As an eight- or nine-year-old she had heard the speech of a *BDM*-leader<sup>6</sup> and, as a consequence, she internalized Hitler's program for women. In this talk, she says, "Above all, it probably was the admonition for self-sacrifice, which had touched her deepest instincts" (Vor allem war es wohl die Mahnung zur Aufopferung, die sich an ihre tiefsten Instinkte wandte; 37–38). An uneasiness invaded her when she noticed that her mother did not express the same instincts in return. When the girl had to render that signature in a life-and-death decision, she felt abandoned by her mother: "Uncertain, the daughter looked at her mother, and her eyes met a white mask, in which the extremely red mouth glowed like a wound. She couldn't expect any support from her mother at that moment. This much the girl understood instantly" (Unsicher sah die Tochter die Mutter an, und ihr Blick traf auf eine weiße Maske, worin der allzu rote Mund wie eine Wunde glühte. Von der Mutter war im Augenblick keine Unterstützung zu erwarten, das wurde dem Mädchen sofort klar; 67). The mother goddess shrivels here to a cold mask of fear, an illusion that cannot offer protection.

The young girl realized

nothing had to be said, there was no choice, there had never been a choice; she was Cordelia, who kept her pledge of loyalty; she was also Proserpina, she was the chosen one, and never had she been closer to the heart of her mother.

(nichts brauchte gesagt zu werden, es gab keine Wahl, hatte nie eine gegeben, sie war Cordelia, die ihr Treuegelöbniß hielt, sie war auch Proserpina, sie war die Auserwählte, und nie hatte sie dem Herzen ihrer Mutter nähergestanden.) (68)

But she could not help relating her feelings to the sufferings of Christ, and she asked in a gender reversal: "Mother, why did you abandon me?" (Mutter, warum hast du mich verlassen? 74). As the mythical Proserpina, she was being sent into the Orcus by her mother. She became an assistant to the infamous Dr. Mengele in the concen-

tration camp of Auschwitz. There she had to make two lists: one with the names of prisoners condemned to die in the gas chambers, the other with the names of those who would be allowed to live a little longer. Is there a more fitting image of a modern Proserpina, who is forced to stand next to the incarnation of supreme evil in the realm of death, against her will, in order to save her mother?

Cordelia rejects the style her mother had selected for her life and for her literary productions. Yet she admits that remembering her childhood myths gave her the power to survive under deadly conditions. She herself replaces mystification and private aestheticism with sober, deconstructive analysis and an active participation in the community. This is her way of coming to terms with her own identity. The difference is reflected in the clarity of her prose, which contrasts strikingly with the ambiguous dark probings of her mother's novel *Proserpina*. Sweden, her postwar homeland, was a suitable, neutral place to find herself. She eventually embraced her Jewish heritage and went to Israel, where she actively participated in the development of that country. Instead of replacing, as Langgässer had done in *Proserpina*, her own mother with a mythical, motherly power that could compensate for her abandonment, she added to her German birth mother, Elisabeth Langgässer, two other women who supported her during her life in a motherly fashion: Stefi Pedersen of Stockholm and Sylvia Krown of Jerusalem; they became her mothers as well, and she dedicated her book to all three of them. Not until long after her release from the concentration camp did she visit her mother (a single brief visit in 1949). At her request, she placed at her mother's disposal facts and dates of her journey of suffering from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz for literary use. However, Langgässer's transformation of these materials did not bring mother and daughter closer together. Cordelia cannot understand her mother, who reworked her life into a poetic myth in which the daughter couldn't recognize herself. Edvardson belongs to a generation that can no longer condone an aesthetic cloaking of real, terrifying experiences.

In another book, *Die Welt zusammenfügen* (1988) (*Putting the World Together*), Cordelia Edvardson wrote, forty years after the death of Elisabeth Langgässer, about her conflict with her mother, which was still troubling her:

I have been pregnant with you for sixty years. . . . Again and again I believed the hour had come. . . . Every time the labor pains stopped, you were the fruit of my womb. . . .

You nourished me and choked me at the same time. . . .

"You must not have strange gods before me," you said and left very little room, for me, and the men in my life and my own children, your grandchildren.

I became one of those women, and we are many, who could never be quite mothers to our children, especially to our daughters; our mothers did not permit it. . . .

What will be left of me after I have given birth to you and have severed the umbilical cord? And what is to become of you? And when you will no longer own my life, how will you find peace in your grave, in which you have been resting for forty years? Beloved, hated mother! I am afraid of you. I fear your revenge.

(Fast sechzig Jahre bin ich mit Dir schwanger gegangen. . . . Wieder und wieder glaubte ich, meine Stunde sei gekommen . . . . Jedesmal hörten die Wehen auf, du warst meine Leibesfrucht. . . .

Du hast mich genährt und gleichzeitig erstickt. . . .

“Du sollst nicht andere Götter haben neben mir”, befahlst Du und liebst mir sehr wenig Raum, mir und den Männern in meinem Leben und meinen eigenen Kindern, Deinen Enkeln. Ich wurde eine dieser Frauen, und wir sind viele, die unseren Kindern nie ganz Mütter sein konnten, vor allem nicht unseren Töchtern; unsere Mütter ließen es nicht zu . . . . Was bleibt von mir, wenn ich Dich geboren und die Nabelschnur durchtrennt habe? Und was wird aus Dir? Wie findest Du Ruhe im Grab, in dem Du schon fast vierzig Jahre liegst, wenn Du nicht länger mein Leben besitzt? Geliebte, gehaßte Mutter! Ich habe Angst vor Dir. Angst vor Deiner Rache.)

(134–136)

This text mirrors a powerful connection between mother and daughter and a dependence that haunts the daughter's life. At the same time, Edvardson is aware that the terrible mother is, in the final analysis “her dream” (ihr Traum), and she intends to make the attempt to “free herself” (sich freizusprechen) from her mother, because she knows of the “responsibility of human beings for their own dreams” (Verantwortung des Menschen für seine Träume; 134). But her road of suffering shows that this image of an admired ideal, with which the daughter grew up, is untenable: the image of a loving mother who protects her daughter and guarantees her a happy life. In a generational reversal, daughters need to give birth to their mothers by reconstructing their image through autobiographical texts. Edvardson asks: what are mothers, when they know that their daughters don't need them anymore? We might add, what fills the gap, when the symbiotic constellation of Demeter, Ceres, and Proserpina is no longer serving patriarchy through a prescribed sacrifice?

This alienation of mother and daughter in a patriarchal society is the central focus of the two novels. The fascist tendencies of the fatherland caused the two writers to rethink one of the dominant myths. In *Proserpina*, Langgässer searches for emancipation and deconstructs the myth of universal motherhood that stands against the individual desires of the daughter. Yet, her attempts come too early, she breaks off her novel inconclusively. Edvardson, on the other hand, goes beyond mere reflection. She faces squarely the actual tyranny of fascism that destroyed her bond with her mother. Both women become daughters without mothers, one in an abstract, the other in a concrete sense. At the same time they

become alienated from their “fatherland.” In this tenuous position, the traditional dyad of mother and daughter is lost, without something new having taken its place. The loss is painful, but for both women in a different sense new options open up, for Edvardson more clearly than for Langgässer. The wish of both writers, to choose many women as mothers, is a step toward a “motherland” in which fascism might not have a chance.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. For instance, see the book by Gättens, *Women Writers and Fascism. Reconstructing History*.

2. This translation, like all subsequent translations of German texts, is my own.

3. All quotations in the text are from *Proserpina* (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Vienna: Ullstein, 1982).

4. See Freud's essay “Das Motiv der Kästchenwahl” (The Motive of the Choice of Box) (24–37) and Treusch-Dieter's discussion of it (161–183).

5. Lately, Langgässer has been criticized for her attempts to fit into an Aryan environment by pleading with the NS government. In her book, *Wotans Rabe. Elisabeth Langgässer, ihre Tochter Cordelia und die Feuer von Auschwitz* (1997) (*Wotan's Raven. Elisabeth Langgässer, her daughter Cordelia, and the Fires of Auschwitz*), Ursula El-Akramy notes that Langgässer would gladly have come out of her inner immigration if she had been allowed to do so. For instance, she wrote a letter to Reichskulturwalter (national minister of culture) Hinkel on August 17, 1937, in which she makes the following revealing statement: “Meinen künstlerischen Beruf kann ich auf die rein arische Linie meiner mütterlichen Vorfahren [ . . . ] zurückführen. Ausserdem habe ich einen arischen Halbbruder [ . . . ] ich bin mit einem Mann von rein arischer Herkunft verheiratet [ . . . ] (My artistic profession goes back directly to the purely Aryan lineage of my maternal predecessors. Moreover, I have an Aryan half-brother. I am married to a man of pure Aryan descent; 114).

In a 1997 article on Langgässer's 1936 novel *Der Gang durch das Ried* (*The Walk through the Bog*) Cathy Gelbin notes that rather “than representing an indifferent stance toward the Hitlerian state in this novel, the author attempts to write the hybrid Aladin (who is the protagonist) and thus Langgässer herself, back into the fascist notion of the German Volk” (Gelbin, 155). In analyzing the novel Gelbin comes to the conclusion that the writer “merely changes the negative connotations of older discourses around the Jew and the hybrid into positive ones, while leaving the stereotype intact” (Gelbin, 158–159).

I neither wish to psychologize Langgässer's wish to write herself into the Nazi discourse as a German during the threatening times, nor can I speculate about possible guilt on her part concerning the fate of her daughter. I rely on the known facts, according to which she did her utmost to save her child. Both were victims of unbearable circumstances.

6. BDM = Bund deutscher Mädel (League of German Girls), the female version of the Hitler youth for fourteen- to eighteen-year-old girls.



7. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in German as "Verlassene Töchter und die Asche des Muttermythos," in Helga Kraft and Elke Liebs, eds., *Mütter—Töchter—Frauen. Weiblichkeitsbilder in der Literatur* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1993), 193–214.

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