In a recent interview, Marie Nimier states that she sees *Photo-Photo* and her previous works as forming parts of a larger fresco.\(^1\) We might say that she views each novel as though it were part of a puzzle that she is both inventing and discovering as an overall picture emerges. And this puzzle is profoundly concerned with influence, or the effects of the ‘absent’ on the ‘present’, when each term of that dichotomy bears the trace of its opposite (a situation that justifies the increasingly common term ‘presence-in-absence’). Although it would be reductive to read *Photo-Photo* as exclusively concerned with the absence/presence of the father, I will concentrate below on the influence of that figure on the narrator’s portrayal of her life and writing.

The one direct reference in *Photo-Photo* to the narrator’s father, and by extension that of the author,\(^2\) is contained in the following passage:

*Le ciel comme un endroit…* Ces mots souvent me reviendront à l’esprit pendant mon séjour à Baden-Baden. Je les avais lus dans la marge d’un cahier retrouvé dans les affaires de mon père. Je savais qu’un jour, j’écrirais quelque chose, un livre, une nouvelle, une chanson qui porterait ce titre en pensant discrètement à lui.

Et si ce livre était celui-ci?

*(The sky as a place…* These words will keep coming to mind during my trip to Baden-Baden. I had read them in the margins of a notebook that had been found among my father’s things. I knew that one day
I would write something – a book, a novella, a song – with this title, and I would be thinking, discreetly, of him.

And what if that book were this book?)³

This passage invites us to see *Photo-Photo* in a double perspective, which seems appropriate for a book with a double title. Of course, at first glance, that perspective seems a logically impossible one: ‘this book’ cannot both be and not be ‘that book’. For instance, if ‘that book’ has the title *Le Ciel comme un endroit*, ‘this book’ (*Photo-Photo*) does not. Yet Nimier does not abandon her conceit. In the closing pages, in a final drawing-together of the novel’s key themes and motifs, she writes: ‘Le ciel comme un endroit, et le monde à l’envers’ (‘the sky [or Heaven] as a place, and the world turned upside down’; p. 210).⁴ By recalling the title so late in her novel, she seems to insist that *Photo-Photo* ‘is and is not’ the work suggested by her father’s marginal note.⁵

However, perhaps this conceit can be seen as logical in its way, for this passage is one of many self-reflexive ones, which permit us to distinguish between two books within the ‘one’ we are reading. One of these books is supposedly (so the fiction suggests) in the process of being written as we read, and may or may not end up being published as *Photo-Photo*; that is the book in which the unnamed narrator puzzles over which course her book should take at given moments, and is advised in the process by her boyfriend (or ex-boyfriend) Stephen, who lives in Canada. The second book, which is definitively entitled *Photo-Photo*, is the novel that exists in reality. The latter can no longer be revised (rethought, improved, abandoned and so on), because it is the actual book that the real reader holds in her hands, written by the real author Marie Nimier. The distinction is made in one of many self-referential passages where the narrator ponders her writerly dilemmas:

Je vivais dans un monde aux frontières flottantes. Ce qui tournait dans ma tête n’avait pas moins de réalité que ce qui était couché sur le papier. […] Stephen avait raison lorsqu’il parlait de la nécessité d’une rupture, mais parlait-il vraiment du roman?

S’il parlait bien du roman, il suffirait que le livre existe physiquement, qu’il soit traité comme un objet, empaqueté, ouvert, qu’il ait touché et été touché par des inconnus pour que les deux mondes se séparent.