

Book Review

Review of *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* by Esther Rashkin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016 (Originally published 1992), 222 pages, ISBN 978-691633749 (hbk).

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In an era priding itself on transparency but inundated by lies, a reading technique that demonstrates the unveiling of secrets belongs to the zeitgeist. Originally a dissertation for a doctoral degree in French from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, this brilliant book by the psychoanalyst and literary detective Esther Rashkin has the classic form of six chapters, plus an Introduction, a conclusion, notes, and an index. Chapter One sets out Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's work on ancestral haunting. Subsequent chapters demonstrate how fictive characters in five stories have been driven into existence by a "need to preserve intact while making unintelligible an unspeakable family drama" (p. 160). Rashkin identifies and unravels conundrums in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* (1909), Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Intersignum* (1899), Honoré de Balzac's *Facino Cane* (1836), Henry James's *The Jolly Corner* (1908), and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839).

Several decades old, this book is arguably more useful now than ever not only for psychoanalytic and feminist studies but for family history, given the current boom in ancestry studies evident in the possibilities of DNA testing and the popular television series *Who Do you Think You Are?* and *Finding Your Roots*. It is somehow appropriate that Rashkin teaches at the University of Utah, for this state is home to the genealogical records amassed by the Mormon Church and now owned by ancestry.com, the largest for-profit genealogical enterprise in the world.

Basing her readings on Abraham and Torok's dual unity theory of development and their studies of cryptonyms (words that hide), Esther Rashkin performs detailed and astounding explications of puzzling textual anomalies and character enigmas. Through very close and clever readings, often multilingual, Rashkin persuasively discloses intergenerational transmission of silenced traumas in narratives that reveal but in revealing hide a secret. She discloses hidden scenes that complement and clarify unconscious dynamics of the way enigmatic characters behave and the way in which literature communicates unspeakable secrets.

The book comes to a persuasive climax in the explication of ancestral dramas mutely informing James's *The Jolly Corner* and Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, both ghost stories of sorts that communicate via phantom voices. She conjectures that her method of reading has implications for finding hidden histories of women as well as "group pathologies that emerge in response to traumatic political dramas" (p. 165), a theme Rashkin has taken up in her second book, *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* (2008).

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Unlike Freud and Lacan, the Hungarian-born Parisian psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok theorize no fixed schema such as oral, anal, phallic, oedipal stages or transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic for individuation, but see individuals as forever in symbolic unity with aspects of the mother and the mother's mind. "Every child's emergence as an individual is distinctive, constituted by repressions of uniquely charged pieces-of-the-mother, each bearing affects specifically related to the singular circumstances and psychic traumas of the mother's life. Moreover, since every mother is also the child of another mother, she must herself be understood as always already carrying the contents of another's unconscious. That is why Abraham refers to the dual unity as the 'genealogical concept par excellence'. We are all the psychic products of our infinitely regressive family histories" (Rashkin, p. 18). Literary transmissions of these histories share their secrets with their readers or hearers, who may receive them unwittingly. This concept of the relationship between deep family history, psychic history, silenced trauma, and repression elaborates a radical shift from previous psychoanalytic views of "the Other" as a capitalized, generalizable notion. Anasemic analysis and identification of phantom presences allow Rashkin to excavate the "other" in certain narratives as a specific entity, situated beyond the subject, who holds that subject in a dual unity. This "other" is "a text-specific identity whose concealment of a drama" Rashkin reconstructs from "particular, linguistically decipherable elements" (p. 158).

Rashkin thinks Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* shows how a concealed ancestral secret gets shared via phantom transmission. Co-active with the story's epigraph, plus Roderick Usher's incoherent manner and cryptic speech, and the titles in his esoteric library, and the inserted tale *Mad Trist*, the poem *The Haunted Palace*, embedded in the text, co-symbolizes the overall text, which communicates to the narrator and thus to the reader a scene of rape and mental decapitation. This scene constitutes a "supposititious force" communicating the unspoken story of the infiltration of the Usher family line by a fraudulent heir conceived violently. Madeline (a version of the woman who made-the-line), says Rashkin, embodies the part of the mother wanting to keep intact the head of her family. Roderick's behavior parallels the other half of the struggle: her battle to voice the secret and expose the fraudulent heir. This struggle becomes evident the moment the narrator arrives at the mansion and gets ushered into Roderick's presence. Roderick seems to be agitated by "some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled". Rashkin calls the cadaverous, nervous Roderick, inhabited by the dead, "the living incarnation of the deceased person who created an oppressive secret and fought to divulge it" (p. 143). He is the part of the lady-who-made-the-line that struggled to speak.

Roderick's agitation infects the narrator, who feels upon his heart an incubus of creeping alarm overpowering him with horror. The narrator flees the mansion "aghast." Although the narrator's reading aloud the *Mad Trist* has brought the family trauma to Roderick's mind, the narrator has no awareness of having done so; he remains a bewildered observer. Rashkin sees him as an unconscious exorcist who gets an entombed family phantom to speak without himself understanding the psychic drama he has conjured or making Roderick cognizant of what has been revealed.

Rashkin claims this infectious haunting of the narrator by a ghostly secret can be a model for the dynamics of what goes on for the reader of certain kinds of uncanny texts. She writes, "Not only is the phantom inhabiting the Usher race shared or

divided between two heirs, but a figure outside the line is infected by it” (p. 151). “Readers, [Poe’s] text tells us, may at times function like the narrator: as unknowing ‘voicers of things hidden’ who successfully bring out, conjure, or ‘exorcise’ dramas concealed within narratives but who are unable to hear the ciphered content of these dramas or articulate their significance” (p. 152). Thus readers may share unconscious knowledge of a family secret transmitted by a character and text that remain enigmatic.

Unlike Poe’s narrator who makes a phantom speak in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Alice Staverton in Henry James’s *The Jolly Corner* puts a phantom to sleep, deflecting Spencer Brydon’s haunting by his cuckolded grandfather and alter ego, who witnessed a scene revealing how he kept in the thing he loved a corner for another’s uses. Just returned to New York City from a long sojourn in Europe, Spencer sees himself as belonging to a world of apparitions. Heir to an empty family house near Washington Square, he roams it late at night as what Rashkin calls “one single seat of consciousness within which reside, mingle, and intertwine several ghostly incarnations, having nothing to do with him per se, that have returned from a buried part of his family history to haunt him” (p. 96). As in Poe’s *House of Usher*, multiple presences within a psyche bear witness to infiltration of a line of forebears. By identifying the mechanisms by which Spencer Brydon’s character and speech thwart comprehension, Rashkin teases out the hidden principle of coherence in what is otherwise opaque. Miss Staverton, claiming an intimate relationship with Spencer, puts a family phantom to rest in a cryptic ambiguity that verbally joins him with his alter ego.

In the chapter titled *Legacies of Gold*, analyzing another tale of secret patrimony, Rashkin takes a cue from the eponymous narrator’s remark in Balzac’s *Facino Cane* that during her pregnancy his mother had a passion for gold. The narrator declares himself “the victim of a monomania, of a craving for gold which must be gratified”. The possibility that Facino Cane’s obsession has been inherited prompts Rashkin to conjecture a phantom at work in the narrative. The bizarre events of the story “emerge as parts of a concealed but identifiable drama. A secret has been created concerning Facino Cane’s origins, a secret concealed by his mother upon his conception or birth and transmitted to him as a passion for gold”. What his mother could not say gets expressed through Cane’s behavior. Ostensibly a story of a man obsessed by gold, Rashkin shows Facino Cane to be “the tale of a man possessed by a phantom, by the secret of his Jewish origins that has been transmitted to him by his mother as his psychic inheritance” (p. 86). Cane “creates his life as the cryptic narrative of the tale his mother could not utter” (p. 91). Having received a phantom from his mother, Cane repeatedly exposes himself to imprisonment and exile, tacitly, says Rashkin, identifying “himself with the captives in exile in Babylon; he acts out his father’s—and hence his own—unspeakable identity as Jewish. The seemingly fantastical, impulsive, self-destructive behavior constituting his existence can thus be understood as a function of the symbolic re-creation of the secret drama of his origins, which he alternately reenacts and seeks to know” (p. 88).

Contrasted with possible Freudian or Lacanian interpretations, Rashkin’s semiological method of analysis offers a “nondevelopmental, nonphallogocentric view of behavior that does not assume as its core a system of substitutions based on either incest and castration or the Imaginary and the Symbolic”. Rashkin links “influences outside

Cane's own lived experience with the creation of a specific symptom that preserves intact an unspeakable secret while cryptically revealing its contents" (p. 86).

In an "admittedly surprising" reading of Villiers de L'Isle Adam's *Intersignum*, a tale of premonition, Rashkin detects through ingenious discovery of homonyms, traces, and obscure correspondences yet another case of illegitimate paternity that has been hidden. The narrator Xavier "becomes the unknowing caretaker of his father's secret." He is a man living "with the ghostly presence of his true father encrypted within the words of his tale" (p. 78). Xavier's last name, given as "de la V***," points to "délavé," which points to "de l'ave," which points to "de l'abbé," that is, to the priest who secretly fathered Xavier de la V. Hallucinating, Xavier is "caught in a double structure in which something is both hidden and exposed, in which he is simultaneously shown something frightening and made to remain ignorant of it" (p.68).

To interpret Xavier's tale, says Rashkin, is "to reveal the various (and theoretically infinite) techniques by which meanings are carried or borne from one place, state, or form to another. It means recognizing that the *intersigne* of the text's title, while it may on one level signify an announcement or premonition of death, also refers to 'the sign within,' to the encrypted signs hidden within and elided from between the words constitutive of the text's substance and its enigma. The 'intersign' of the title is an interred sign, the sign inscribed and enshrouded within the narrative that reveals Xavier's buried identity, his unspoken yet audible name" (p. 79).

Rashkin detects haunting by a murderous drama in the captain's unsettled feelings and behavior in Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*. The captain cannot state the scene of violence because, deduces Rashkin, it lodges unwittingly within him as "knowledge kept secret by someone else and transmitted to him as a phantom" (p. 59). "By concealing Leggatt in his stateroom and transforming his ghostly presence and specific drama of murder into an artificial secret, the captain creates a situation in which he can symbolically act out sharing the unspeakable killing beyond his ken" (p. 60). The captain's creation of fictitious scenarios of sharing declare in cipher form his estrangement from the unspeakable secret of murder. This particular kind of symbol-formation Rashkin sees as an "allegory of the phantom structure" (p. 61).

The only one of Rashkin's chosen stories not to harbor a concealed illegitimate birth, *The Secret Sharer* "is a narrative constituted by the captain's unrecognized drive to invent external, imaginary dramas of secret sharing that duplicate and allegorize, by virtue of the lie of sharing at their core, the internal, psychic configuration specific to the phantom". The captain hallucinates and lives out a semblance of dual unity in which he falsely shares a secret with Leggatt obliquely pointing to the pathological dual unity or phantom structure in which he is trapped and in which, by definition, a secret cannot be shared. Rashkin writes, "The constellation at the core of psychic distress in all the texts in this study—the inability to share a secret—is thus transformed, in *The Secret Sharer*, into a hallucinatory symptom whose obsessive repetition becomes the fundamental substance of the narrative itself" (p. 61).

Rashkin's semiological decryptions contribute not only case histories but family histories, and as such contribute to the field of studying what is hidden in history. She concludes that using the analytic concepts of symbol and cryptonymy enable us to

understand how certain characters' expressions of estrangement are "symptomatic of their individual work of self-creation as 'other' in response to their (unrecognized) need to preserve intact someone else's secret" (p. 159). This connects Rashkin's work to what the Parisian psychoanalyst Haydée Faimberg calls "the telescoping of generations", in which children, captured and ruled by internal parents, become depositories of repudiated aspects of their family histories. These children Rashkin calls guardians or "conservators of dramas or signifieds that have to be cut off from the signifying chain because they are too shameful to be revealed". Characters haunted by phantoms, Rashkin writes, "transform themselves into symbolic or cryptonymic accounts of what could not and must not be said. Through speech and behavior unwittingly created to defy cognition, they become themselves ciphered sagas of how and why particular signifieds were hidden and made inaccessible and of the psychic topography that ensured these signifieds' continued concealment" (p. 159). Her work excavates unconscious histories.

Rashkin has added to the domain of family history and to character studies in literature a way of unveiling genealogies of enigmatic behaviors. Her reading procedure involves cultivating awareness of a "narrative's potential susceptibility to transtextual analysis. It means recognizing that textual fragments or symbols in certain narratives have to be joined to their absent co-symbols across a disruption or discontinuity in a transgenerational saga which, while not readily apparent, anchors the unfolding of the narrative". Transtexts function as readable traces "characteristic of phantom-texts in which their significance emerges as they are carried back across a gap or silence inherited by a character and are rejoined to a missing part of that character's unspoken family history. Reading transtextually is thus a process of bridging a 'generation gap' embedded in a fictive narrative. It involves reuniting with their informing complements textual elements whose separation is the result of an ancestor's refusal to speak, and whose reunion makes it possible to hear what was silenced" (p. 162). This offers a new dimension to the idea of literature as a form of ancestor worship, suggesting that certain uncanny texts can be read as totems.

Family history became a preoccupation in the 1970s as part of feminism's many challenges to the "Great Man" theory of history. Seeing the world from a woman's point of view means paying attention to the cultural history of the family because women by tradition have mainly worked in situations compatible with their caring for children. The field of study suggested by Lawrence Stone's (1977) landmark book *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* helped open the way for the emergence family histories as important public literary forms during the last decades of the twentieth century.

BBC television's genealogical research program *Who Do You Think You Are?* began as a way of doing history from the point of view of particular families. In producing the show, Alex Graham hoped a compendium of family genealogies would add up to history of Britain alternative to those broadcast by academics such as Simon Schama (*A History of Britain*, BBC TV, 2000) and David Starkey (*Monarchy*, BBC TV, 2004-2006). Graham's first program originated with the idea of describing the Industrial Revolution from the bottom rather than from the more-usual point of view of its tycoons. For this, Graham chose a protagonist who came from a family of mill workers in Birmingham. But the program turned out instead to be about Britain's treatment of mad people because the story of the protagonist's mother, who had been

institutionalized for mental illness, had been unknown to him before the show was researched. The drama of this program was less the story of the mad woman than the unfolding of the truth about his mother in the mind of her son, Bill Oddie.

In listening to what was silenced, Rashkin's work has implications for feminist scholarship because psychoanalytic feminists seek "alternatives to phallogocentric models of interpretation for articulating and explaining the roles of women, gender, and the suppression of the female voice in literature". In Rashkin's reading of the Balzac story, Facino Cane's mother's secret gets voiced cryptically through her son. Similarly, Rashkin shows how the brother and sister in Poe's tale are driven "by a secret rape and illegitimacy kept silent by a woman centuries earlier." Thus Poe is telling the story of this woman's suppressed history, kept silent in her family but oozing through the Usher house, from which it finally rushes like a ghastly river in a whirlwind. Of interest therefore for feminism, Rashkin's method of reading invites conjectures about how absent women's voices may be heard across time as "transmitted by someone of a different sex, class, culture, or nationality" (p. 164).

Author's Biographical Note

Dianne M. Hunter, Emeritus Professor of English at Trinity College in Connecticut, USA, edited *Seduction and Theory* (1989) and *The Makings of Dr. Charcot's Hysteria Shows* (1998). She has published essays on hysteria, seduction, psychoanalytic and feminist theory, Juliet Mitchell, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Godwin Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Shakespeare, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Bertha Pappenheim, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Toni Dove, and Carolee Schneemann.

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