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and Dermot Bolger's *A Second Life*

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Chapter One

From ghostly presence to haunting absence

Photography in Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*
and Dermot Bolger's *A Second Life*



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Abstract: This chapter studies the haunting nature of photography. In Hugo Hamilton's memoir, the photograph of the narrator's grandfather, the *Sailor in the Wardrobe*, provides the indisputable proof of the participation of Irish people in the British navy, to the horror of the narrator's father. Despite the truth value attached to it, the photograph is still, as are all photographs, a representation, and, therefore, ghostly. It is deliberately hidden, and its concealment haunts the narrator all the more. The narrator of Dermot Bolger's novel, *A Second Life*, is haunted by a photograph which was never taken – that of his birth mother, deliberately excluded, as were so many other women in 20th-century Ireland, after falling pregnant out of wedlock. After a car accident Sean Blake finds himself compelled to investigate his birth mother, for whom no photographic proof seems to exist. Returning to the convent where he believes his mother was held, he photographs the little remaining proof of the lives of the women and babies who passed through this place. The two narrators are haunted, one by a photograph which refuses to be forgotten, the other by a photographic blank which can only be prevented from haunting if it is remembered.

Keywords: Photography, Evidence, Representation, Haunting, Memory, Citizenry of photography

A RECENT exhibition organised by the LaM museum, Villeneuve d'Ascq,¹ entitled “Lesage, Simon, Crépin: Peintres, spirites et guérisseurs” brought together the works of three painters, all originally from the north of France, and all influenced by the

1. LaM, Lille Métropole Musée d'Art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut

spiritualist movement which originated in the United States in the middle of the 19th century, and which posited the continued presence of the deceased in the world of the living, and their communication with those they had left behind. Families who visited the exhibition were given the opportunity to have a ghostly family photograph taken, using a brief delay in the taking of the photograph during which family members changed position. The resulting photo showed each family member, and simultaneously their ghostly presence.

Like every reader of Hugo Hamilton's childhood memoir, I have been interested in the presence throughout both *The Speckled People* and the second volume of the memoir, of the photograph of the eponymous *Sailor in the Wardrobe*, Hugo Hamilton's paternal grandfather wearing a Royal Navy uniform. Hamilton's father finds this image so unacceptable that the photograph is buried in the wardrobe. What is intolerable to Hamilton's father relates to the truth value often attributed to photographs. In the early history of photography, this new technology was seen as providing the possibility of objective representation, and its intrinsic value came from its role as evidence, documentary proof that that which appeared in the photograph – at least before the advent of Photoshop – was indisputably there.

And yet the ghostly family photographs taken at the LaM museum shine another light on the nature of photography. A photograph, however objectively it represents its subject, is nonetheless still a representation, and the very business of representation – where one, present, element stands in for another, absent, element – is necessarily “ghostly” or spectral: that is, its sense necessarily depends on something that is not there.

In portrait photography, which we most often encounter in the form of family photography, we are more often than not reminded of the mortality (past or future) of the person or people represented. For Susan Sontag in *On Photography*,

Photography is the inventory of mortality [...] Photographs show people being so irrefutably there and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded [...] Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.²

Susan Sontag suggests that not only are photography and death innately linked, but that this link is itself a source of haunting.

2. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London, Penguin, 1977, p. 70.

Roland Barthes goes one step further in this intertwining of photography and ghostliness when in *La Chambre claire*, he remarks that having one's own photograph taken is the moment when the subject of the photograph becomes object, and in so doing “*je deviens vraiment spectre*”,³ the logical conclusion of his subdivision of the taking of a photograph into three moments: “*faire* (Operator), *subir* (Spectrum), *regarder* (Spectator)”.⁴

To return to the photograph at the heart of *The Speckled People*, the history of the Hamilton family as told by the child narrator is inhabited, almost haunted, by this photograph which was first discovered by the narrator and his siblings in the very early pages of the text:

But then we found a big black and white picture of a sailor. He was dressed in a sailor's uniform with square, white lapels over his tunic and a rope lanyard hanging down over his chest. He had soft eyes and I liked the look of him. I wanted to be a sailor, even though I had no idea what this sailor was doing in my father's wardrobe.⁵

The discovery, and the mystery of its concealment, fascinates the young Hugo, as witnessed by numerous references to it throughout the subsequent pages of *The Speckled People*, and he gradually comes to understand why this photograph has been buried. Hugo Hamilton's father cannot accept that his own father had been a member of the Royal Navy, fighting for a king and a country whose spectral presence in Ireland his son refuses to acknowledge. While Hamilton's German maternal grandparents' photograph has pride of place above the mantelpiece in the “good room”, his Irish grandparents are hidden away out of sight:

There's a picture in the front room of Franz Kaiser and Berta Kaiser with her head leaning on his shoulder, both of them laughing with a big glass of wine on the table in front of them. There's no picture of John Hamilton or his wife Mary Frances, alone or together, hanging anywhere in our house. Our German grandparents are dead, but our Irish grandparents are dead and forgotten.⁶

However, for people who are dead and forgotten, they appear reluctant to remain so, and the very concealment of the photograph transforms it into a haunting presence, more than if their photograph had been displayed for all to see. In Derrida's theory of hauntology, “*le fantôme ne meurt jamais, il reste toujours à venir et à re-venir*”.⁷ It is through the forced absence of a photograph which would have testified to a past which

3. Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Paris, L'Étoile, 1980, p. 30.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
5. Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, London, Harper Collins, 2003, p. 11.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, Paris, Galilée, 1993, p. 163.

will not go away, that the ghostly presence of Hamilton's paternal grandfather comes to haunt the entire Hamilton family. No questions will be answered about this mysterious ancestor, and he will be disappeared again on Hamilton's father's strict instructions:

The picture of the sailor with the soft eyes disappeared and we never saw him again after that. Nobody mentioned him. I had no way of keeping him in my head because he was gone, back into the wardrobe where nobody could rescue him. We didn't know how to remember him, and like him, we lost our memory.⁸

Losing their memory of their paternal grandfather is precisely what Hugo Hamilton's father is hoping to achieve by hiding the photograph, because it represents a past which the father rejects in favour of a brighter future which he hopes to be instrumental in creating. But in *Family Frames: Photography, narrative and postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch describes how the haunting power of a photograph confirms the immutability of a past event, however much one might like to change it: "Photography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability."⁹ As Hugo and his siblings never knew their paternal grandfather, their memory of him is mediated by the photograph and its concealment. In depriving his children of this understanding of their grandfather, Hugo Hamilton's father is attempting to prevent the photograph from doing what Barthes contends is the very nature of photography: "*cette chose un peu terrible qu'il y a dans toute photographie: le retour du mort.*"¹⁰ Returning to Marianne Hirsch, "Photographs in their enduring 'umbilical' connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory."¹¹ The sailor in the wardrobe is a ghostly presence which, try as he might, Hugo Hamilton's father cannot return to the spirit world from which it emerges.

While Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* explores how one family can be haunted by a photograph which one might wish never to have been taken, another text explores how a never-taken photograph might have a corollary effect. One aspect of photography which has not yet been explored is its selective nature. The status of any single photograph does not go without saying: it is part of a wider context – it is, literally, a framed out-take of a larger surrounding, which begs a number of questions: why

8. Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

9. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, narrative and post-memory*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 1997, p. 20.

10. Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

11. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

has it been taken, who has taken it, who has selected what to frame, who has decided that this particular picture is worthy of being taken?

The answers to these questions regarding the photograph of the sailor in the wardrobe may be relatively easily divined, as the sailor would undoubtedly have been considered a member of what Ariella Azoulay has termed “the citizenry of photography”, the same cannot be said about all of the people and scenes which have not been photographed, which have not been deemed worthy of the interest of the eye of the photographer, and for which, therefore, there is no documentary evidence. Such people might include the women and children victims of what has been referred to as the architecture of containment which prevailed in Ireland throughout much of the 20th century, like the narrator’s birth mother in Dermot Bolger’s *A Second Life*.¹² These individuals were explicitly excluded from the citizenry of photography as discussed by Azoulay:

Simply acknowledging that you and I live in a world in which photographs might be taken of us, and in which we might also take photographs, is sufficient requirement for entry into this citizenry. Photographs can be both an acknowledgement of the subject’s existence as a citizen of photography and a demand to be recognised as a citizen in a political sense. [...] her arguments [...] apply to [...] many other marginalised or oppressed groups.¹³

Bringing together the haunting presence of the sailor in the wardrobe in Hugo Hamilton’s text with the ghostly absence of photographic evidence in *A Second Life* might appear spurious, were it not for the profession (none other than photographer) and recent near-death experience of the narrator. Sean Blake, the novel’s narrator, survives a car crash in the early pages of the novel, but his heart briefly stopped beating, and the images which he believes he saw on this occasion will haunt him throughout his recovery, and will only be resolved by his transformation of those images into a series of photographs, which fill a gap – a haunting absence

12. *A Second Life* was written in 1993, the year the nuns of the High Park Magdalene laundry in Drumcondra applied for the exhumation of the women buried there. In an article published in *The Irish Times* when the revised edition of the novel was about to come out, Dermot Bolger makes the connection between Sean’s mother’s story and that of the Magdalene laundries: “On the day I entered the GPO in Dublin to post the original manuscript of this book, three survivors from that Magdalene laundry were seated outside the entrance, visible at last in a historical site of rebellion, defiantly collecting signatures for a petition to have a monument erected to those nameless woman whose ashes were in that mass grave. I stopped to sign the petition and to talk. I almost held aloft the Jiffy bag and was about to say, ‘This book is about you and women like you. It tells one of your stories.’ But wisely I said nothing: this book could not be about them, because nobody could tell the stories they uniquely owned”. Dermot Bolger, “A novel idea: why it was time for a rewrite”, *The Irish Times*, September 18, 2010 (<https://www.irishtimes.com/1.652600>).
13. Owen Clayton, “Barthes for Barthes’ Sake?: Victorian Literature and Photography beyond Post-structuralism”, *Literature Compass*, 13(4), 2016, p. 245-257 (doi:10.1111/lic3.12327), p. 253.

of photographs taken of his birth-mother and any number of other women who found themselves in the same situation as her.

The adopted son of a photographer, Sean became aware at an early age of the power of photography to irrefutably prove that something took place, but equally that it can be manipulated to conceal a different truth. On his tenth birthday, his parents told him that he had been adopted and, as if to soften the blow, simultaneously gifted him his first camera. He surprised himself with the violence of his reaction: suspended from school for stealing, he destroys the family photographs which he now sees as having dissimulated the truth about his existence:

The old album was kept in the press downstairs. [...] My life was laid out, dutifully recorded in black and white snaps. [...] I had trusted photographs always, badgering my mother to take the album out and retrace each year of my life with her. I turned to the first page, where the first ever photograph of me was pasted in by itself. [...] Now I knew that the photograph was lying. I was not her son. [...] I felt no anger towards her or my father, it was the photograph which I blamed. It would never cheat again.¹⁴

Sean subsequently allowed himself to move on with his life, marrying and becoming a parent himself, and following in his father's professional footsteps as a photographer, aware of the power this profession gave him to provide evidence of a life about to disappear, as when he photographs the miners in the last coal mine in Ireland on their last day of work, recording this reality for posterity: "They worked that day as though the mine would last for ever, aware perhaps that soon these images would remain as the only proof that they had existed as a body of men. Their features slipped in and out of focus as I clicked so that they seemed just one more integral part of the mine."¹⁵ While these photographs record the reality of the men's existence, the miners also become ghosts of themselves, slipping in and out of focus and becoming spectral elements of a deserted landscape.

Despite a slightly superstitious refusal to have his own photograph taken, Sean's photography bears unself-consciously witness to the reality he chooses to photograph – that which is deemed worthy of the photographer's attention. He also wipes from his mind any other family than that of his adoptive parents, not allowing himself to be haunted by questions about his birth-mother. It is this situation which changes during the brief moments when he himself is dead following a collision with a bus outside the Botanic Gardens in Dublin. During his recovery, while he is between

14. Dermot Bolger, *A Second Life*, London, Penguin, 1994, p. 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

consciousness and unconsciousness, he revisits episodes of his own life, and realises for the first time how little he knows about its inception:

I think about that anonymous woman whose features may perhaps echo my own. [...] Nobody would have been waiting for her in some isolated rural convent, except for the other girls in that same predicament. Mothers allowed to hold their children for a few seconds before the nuns took them away. [...] But I find myself haunted by something I have not thought of for years: my total ignorance about my own birth.¹⁶

Haunted by this image, he is even more so by the image of an unknown male face, which he intuitively feels to be that of his father: “that face which is haunting my sleep [...] He is my real father, I think suddenly, the nameless bastard who ran away. I feel a quivering excitement, the exhilaration of release. I have him now, that figure I know nothing of, not even if he knew of my existence.”¹⁷ It is as if his brush with death functioned as a dark room allowing photographic images to be developed for the first time. During and after his recovery, Sean falls prey to “the obsession to place him”, and repeatedly states that this face haunts his sleep (“But then what about that face which haunted my sleep?”¹⁸, “I know that face now which has haunted me since the accident”¹⁹). It is only much later that he realises that the face of his father is not that which truly haunts him: “That was what I had been doing, burying myself away, playing at ghost-hunting to avoid risking the pain of my real search. *Let the dead take care of the dead. Find her while you can.*”²⁰

Through a series of spectral parallelisms, the novel brings Sean closer and closer to an encounter with his birth-mother Elizabeth Wilkins, née Sweeney, originally from Dunross in the Slieve Bloom mountains, living in Coventry, England at the time of Sean’s accident. Elizabeth is woken one morning by the sound of a car crash, only to discover that if a crash had taken place, it had done so in some ghostly part of her mind:

The street was still, yet she knew that she had heard a crash [...] It had been something real, beyond this house, a noise which had cut into her. [...] She walked on, her hair blown by the slipstream of the trucks, searching to find the crash. When the police discovered her that evening, walking along the motorway in her slippers, the woman constable wrote down the only words she could discern from

16. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

her mumbling: It was him. I know it was Paudi. My baby's dead and he'll never find me now.²¹

Elizabeth's intuition was right – Sean would not find her before her death, but his research does bring him into contact with his aunt Ellen, his mother's younger sister, who meets with him shortly after her sister's death, only to discover that a ghostly connection had allowed Elizabeth some awareness of her lost son's life:

'Since I started this obsession about finding my real mother, [...] ever since I survived an accident last year.'

Ellen put her cup down.

'Was it between Christmas and New Year?' she asked.

Paudi sat back. His face was white. He didn't need to answer her.

'Lizzy was woken up one of those mornings,' Ellen said. 'She claimed it was by the noise of a crash.'²²

So while some ghostly connection between mother and son had never been severed, Elizabeth herself had been erased from history. This deletion from history was made apparent to her by her husband, as can be seen through this anecdote:

The Sunday after they were married he had shown her the same photograph printed twice in the Sunday Express. It was of Joseph Stalin with a group of Soviet generals. 'Look,' he said, 'how simple it is to make somebody vanish.' In the second copy of the photograph one of the generals had been airbrushed out and a pillar superimposed in his place. 'Poor blighter's either shot by now or else digging up the salt for our dinner.'²³[...] She thought of all the homes in Dunross, the photographs of the eleven girls who made their confirmation in the 1948 class with a space which had appeared in the centre; and how in the photograph, cut from the Nationalist and framed above the teacher's desk in the classroom with the three high windows, the Laois county cup for camogie was left hanging in midair now that the Dunross captain in her green skirt had vanished.²⁴

Lizzie sees how Irish society functioned in a similar way to that of Stalinist Russia and how she had been removed from photographs, removing any proof of her existence, showing how unmarried mothers were

21. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 233-234.

23. No doubt a reference to the photo known as that of the "vanishing commissar" where Nikolai Yezhov, who had been head of the secret police during Stalin's Great Purge has been removed subsequent to his execution. (1940). This makes Lizzie think of her own situation, as the end of quotation shows.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

an inconvenient truth whose presence was no longer desirable, depriving them of their “citizenry of photography”. It is this haunting absence of photographic evidence which lies at the heart of Sean/Paudi’s search for the truth. This search takes him to St. Martha’s in County Mayo, now a reputed girl’s school, proud to display the achievements of its past pupils: “There were framed photographs of former students receiving awards,”²⁵ but no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of the role played by this convent and many others at the time of Sean/Paudi’s birth. His anger boils over as he found that he

[...] was shouting. ‘Padraig Sweeney. That’s my name in those filing cabinets over there, or wherever else you’ve stacked your dirty linen. I’m another of your past pupils, so why don’t you stick my fucking photograph up on your wall there? [...] What about a photograph of my mother and all the other girls who were locked behind these gates?’²⁶

Sean feels the need to fill the haunting absence of photographic evidence of his mother’s life, and goes in search of any visual proof of the convent’s past life which he could photograph:

[...] the dump which the girls had spoken of. It was a mile beyond the convent. I had gone past before I realized what it was. [...] All that was left were bits of broken beds, the smashed wooden bars of cots and scraps of loose debris so discoloured that it was hard to know what they had once been. There were six rolls of film in the camera bag. My hands were covered with nettle stings by the time I had shot my way through them. [...] I felt more calmed.²⁷

Back in his studio, Sean works on the photographs until he is happy with them:

These were an elegy for the forgotten, the only monument to my true past which I could leave. But they were also my way of coming to terms with that past. For long periods I had just sat and cried for the mother I had lost, or else had been engulfed by the most intense of angers. Then the impersonal photographer would take over again, finding the shape in the image, coaxing it to life. In those long hours alone in that darkroom I had gradually allowed myself to remember and to accept.²⁸

25. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Marianne Hirsch spoke of photographs having an “enduring ‘umbilical’ connection to life”, allowing for the connection between the generations. This link between Elizabeth Sweeney, Paudi’s mother, and Sean Blake, Lizzie’s son, had been severed, as no photograph had ever recorded it. It was the absence of photographic proof of their connection which had haunted both Lizzie and Sean, and which haunts Lizzie until the end: “She knew that she had to decide whether to allow herself to be dead or to try and pull herself back down into the pain. He had never found her. Already everything else in her life seemed distant, but that yearning remained, trapping her in the tunnel between two worlds.”²⁹ In the final haunting of the novel, Lizzie allows herself to escape this in-between state by accepting death, as she foresees the scattering of her ashes at the graveyard in Dunross organised by Sean and her sister Ellen, the yearning finally coming to an end, and Sean finally genuinely feeling this connection with her: “And the funny thing was that it seemed like I could almost feel my mother’s presence there, for the first time in my life, as we left the gravel path and began to make our way carefully among the graves.”³⁰

The two texts discussed here explore haunting through the medium of photography – in the one instance, a photograph whose ghostly presence refuses to be forgotten, and in the other, a photographic blank which haunts by its absence and can only be prevented from haunting by being remembered.

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29. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 311.