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## "Invisible Ink" -- A Psychoanalytic Study of School Memory

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**“INVISIBLE INK”—  
A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF SCHOOL MEMORY**

**lisa farley**

“Although an only child, for many years I had a brother.” So begins Phillippe Grimbert’s little novel, *Memory* (2004, p. 3). Previously published under the title *Secret*, the story suggests something elusive, and unspoken, about history and its passage through the generations. On one level, little Phillippe’s “brother” is an imaginary friend who embodies all the qualities that Phillippe lacks, and that he fears his father would prefer: “Stronger and better looking. An older brother, invisible and glorious” (p. 3). Then Phillippe makes a discovery in the attic that reveals the terrible secret of the family’s history. When the attic trunk yields a stuffed toy dog, we learn that Phillippe actually did have a brother, Simon, though they could never have met. Simon was, together with his mother, Hannah, murdered the day after the pair was delivered from the Pithiviers transit camp to Auschwitz. The plot of this history becomes more complex when we learn that after the death of his wife and child, Phillippe’s father, Maxime, remarried, and that his second wife—Phillippe’s mother—is also, (and here is the thick of it), Hannah’s beautiful sister-in-law.

The excavation of this hidden history—the weight of grief, forbidden love, and wrenching guilt—adds a second layer of meaning to Phillippe’s imaginary brother. Phillippe now understands that his invention is no longer just good company (though he is also this), but also a symptom of, or a way of coping with, the affective aftermath of the family’s haunting past: “I had put off the moment of knowing for as long as I could, scratching myself on the barbed wire of a prison of silence. To avoid it, I invented myself a brother, unable to recognize the boy imprinted forever in my father’s taciturn gaze” (p. 64). When Phillippe turns fifteen, he finds his opportunity to “meet” Simon—not, of course, in actual fact, but in the form of a remembered history. This meeting occurs in part through a series of events, including watching a Holocaust documentary at school, and also through conversations with a family friend, Louise, who helps Phillippe piece together the stray bits of his past into a narrative, a life history. And, of course, Phillippe undertakes the narration of this history once again, in adulthood, in writing his novel. At both times, history is made when Phillippe can see himself as an author of, rather than authored by, his past. Phillippe’s narrative raises three big

questions that echo my interests in this paper: What does it mean to speak of histories that are largely unspoken? In what ways do unspoken histories nonetheless haunt the present? How might one move from the position of being authored by history to becoming its author?

This essay raises these questions in the context of education. This focus emerges from my interest in thinking about teaching as a form of memory—and specifically, how teachers might think well about the ways in which our educational histories linger, haunt, and shape the pedagogical present. While a number of theorists in education have explored how both teaching and teachers themselves are shaped by locations in identity, culture, and history (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Yon, 2000), I am interested in exploring the emotional significance of teachers' efforts to excavate, and put into words, their own educational histories. This paper argues that when teachers can create narratives that symbolize the unresolved conflicts of their schooling past, they are then in a position to use that history as a source of insight that illuminates the ways the past structures the present, and how the present shapes what we remember of the past. This is what Pitt and Britzman (2003) refer to as writing in the “invisible ink” of history (p. 761).

To explore the veiled lines of this kind of history, I read Sigmund Freud's historical case study of “Little Hans” alongside Jonathan Silin's (2006) pedagogical memoir: *My Father's Keeper: A Story of a Gay Man and His Aging Parents*. In particular, I use these narratives to illustrate two dynamics of history at play in adult/child and student/teacher relations. The first refers to the child's inheritance of unresolved conflicts from a time before his own experience, while the second refers to the history one makes through reconstructive efforts in narrative, thought, and memory. To put these two ideas of history into a vernacular, I am calling the first, “the adult in the child” and the second, “the child in the adult.” I argue that in noticing these dynamics at play in the classroom, teachers not only learn something about the surprising force that their own schooling past has in the present, but also discover how children, surrounded by adults (and often in spite of them), engage in the delicate work of symbolizing the conflicted conditions of their own becoming.

### **The Case of Little Hans**

Between 1907 and 1909, Freud (1909/2002) became curious about the conflicts that preoccupied a child named Little Hans. Little Hans came to Freud presenting a complex of symptoms, including a paralyzing fear of horses biting him

and of horses falling down. Freud hypothesized that Little Hans's phobia was a sophisticated defense, or a way of coping with the Oedipus conflict. This conflict, as Freud described it, refers to the felt tension between the child's wish for the exclusive love of the first "other"—the mother—together with the aggressive wish for the removal of anyone who stands in the way: for Freud, this is the father. The Freudian child is ambivalent from the start: in hot pursuit of love and terrified of its loss. This conflict is so unthinkable, Freud argued, that it is repressed, and we cannot remember (and in fact, often deny) its part in the plots of our childhood histories. But its repression does not mean that the conflict magically goes away; rather, it returns in the disguised form of symptoms—in the case of little Hans, as a phobia of horses. As Hans's phobia became more pervasive, Freud made a bold interpretation that narrated the Oedipal history that he believed sat at its core: behind the biting horse was an image of an angry father, and behind the falling horse, a vulnerable father who, terrifyingly, had succumbed to Hans's destructive wishes. Freud claimed that once he gave language to this unconscious plot, Hans gained greater emotional latitude and his fears became unharnessed, so to speak, from the horses.

The case of Little Hans interests me as an illustration of the historical phenomena of both "the adult in the child" and "the child in the adult." In terms of the first dynamic, Freud held the view that little Hans is born into the world already old, heir to the ancient history of Oedipal conflict that has been unconsciously passed down through the generations. Freud (1909/2002) also noted the peculiar timing of the arrival of the conflict: "before [Hans] can consciously understand his unconscious desires" (p. 99). The significance of this last point may become clearer if we read Hans's phobia alongside the narrative of Phillippe's imaginary brother that began this inquiry. Phillippe describes having invented his brother as a response to the affective force of a history that could neither be understood nor spoken out loud. Hans, too, struggles with the presence of an unspoken history that is too terrible to admit consciously, though in his case, it refers to the Oedipal fantasy of loving and fearing lost love. The crucial point here is that, as we have seen, in Freud's view the child experiences conflicts far older than he is, and that arrive before and in spite of the conscious effort to know them. As Freud (1939/1967) put it: "...there exists an inheritance of memory-traces of what our forefathers experienced, quite independently of direct communication and of the influence of education by example" (p. 127, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, as much as Freud viewed history as something passed down

from above and outside us, he also saw its narration as freeing us, to some extent, from any preordained path. This brings me to the second dynamic of history, the “child in the adult.” At stake in this second dynamic is the possibility of transforming the received, static past, archived in symptoms, into a symbolic narrative, in which we can discover how buried conflicts shape the present, and reshape them in light of this new understanding. I suppose we might say that Freud came close to this symbolic work when he tried to narrate into Hans’s unfolding story the hidden history of Oedipal conflict that he believed manifested itself in the horse phobia. But a crucial point complicates this conclusion. It was Freud, and not Hans himself, who arrived at the construction. And in this regard, Freud’s analysis of little Hans may be read as another example of the first dynamic of history, “the adult in the child.” That is, in presenting the Oedipal conflict as the root of Hans’s symptoms, Freud’s analysis reminds us that adult narratives (and theories) of childhood are less reflections of reality and more constructions that prop up, and pass on, our own ideas and investments (Benzaquén, 1998; Boldt, 2002).

Freud’s rush to an Oedipal answer has a lot to do with the history of psychoanalysis. At the time of his work with Little Hans, Freud held an optimistic view of the function of his interpretations: he believed that the right one could save patients—young or old—from the burden of their conflicts. Today, teachers may recognize both the lure of this rescue fantasy and its risks, for to assert a definitive decision about the meaning of a child’s experience—in the name of development or enlightenment—creates the risk of shutting down the life history a child may construct from her own experiences. In the final section of my paper, I turn to the work of Silin (2006), whose views would startle Freud. Silin describes how children may go about the difficult work of constructing a life history for the self, in spite of adults’ efforts and failures. And in so doing, he challenges teachers to notice the many ways that students give expression to the conditions of becoming, including by resisting the texts and narratives offered in the official curriculum.

### **Little Jonathan: On Writing the “Invisible Ink” of the Schooling Past**

Indeed, Silin (2006) begins his memoir with just such a tale of resistance. Silin’s earliest memories of school are anguished. He hazily recalls “hushed, concerned conferences between...mother and...elementary school teachers” (p. 72). There is an image of second grade in which he is pretending to read, “hoping to appear gainfully employed” (p. 73). Still another memory takes Silin back to the fifth grade, where he decides reluctantly on a Hardy Boys novel whose plotline dis-

appoints his hopes of “illicit intimacy” between the boys pictured on the front cover (p. 74). Despite his initial interest in it, Silin admits that he could neither “remember” nor “finish” the book (p. 74). By high school, these literary scenes coalesce into a “terrain of interpersonal struggle” (pp. 74-75), and he reports nightly battles with his parents over editing his homework. These struggles over periods, commas, and paragraphs have the effect of confusing the voice—the authorship—of the writing: “In the end, I am never quite sure who is the real author of these anguished collaborations” (p. 75). At some point in twelfth grade, Silin pens a coming of age—and coming out—story as part of a project for English class. This adolescent effort is a work symbolizing the sexual conditions of his becoming—this time, with “no parental editing required” (p. 76).

Silin’s memoir offers examples of both “the adult in the child” and “the child in the adult.” In terms of the first dynamic, there is the inheritance of the grammar “principles” that structure the way Silin can string together words on a page. There is also the legacy of the books in the school library. And, as Silin’s narrative makes clear, these inheritances also contain exclusions—links to historical repression—that structure and limit the possibilities of who can love whom. Returning to Freud, we see that Silin’s account bears an uncanny resemblance to the case of Little Hans. Both boys seem to shoulder the weight of an inner history of conflict made from the ambivalent desire both to connect to and break from the relation with their parents. For Hans, you will recall, this silent history took the form of a horse phobia, while for Silin, it returned to shape his struggles with the written word.

And yet, Silin approaches the second dynamic of history—the “child in the adult”—when he turns to language to refashion a relationship to the conflict underlying his early struggles. There is the literary effort of his twelfth-grade English project, of course, but there is also the memoir in which he continues to construct meaning from these experiences. Looking back, Silin (2006) recasts his memory of literary struggle in a new light:

[The] reluctance to claim my ideas on paper, I now believe, was connected in some complicated and still incomprehensible way to my recalcitrant and unacceptable sexuality. The written word was both the medium that tied me to my parents in endless battles over periods, commas, and paragraphs and the medium that eventually allowed me to see myself as an independent agent with a unique story to tell. (p. 75)

Here, Silin reads the “invisible ink” of his early school memories, scripting into his childhood plot a very old conflict—between the desire for his parents’ recognition on the one hand, and the wish to become “an independent agent,” the author of his own history, on the other. Silin offers a further insight when he reads his early difficulties with reading and writing as structuring his contemporary advocacy for children, for the values of progressive education, and for the inclusion of representations of queer identity and experience in the early childhood classroom.

Louise and Freud, respectively, were among the important adult figures in the lives of little Phillipe and little Hans. In Silin’s (2006) account, we meet an entourage of teachers: the second-grade teacher who is audience to his practiced reading “performance,” the school librarian who demands he select a book that he doesn’t want, and the high school English teacher who returns his “homoerotic” narrative without a single comment. We read Silin’s memoir in a course I teach on the emotional life of the teacher. In considering his literary struggles, the focus of our discussions tends to center on the failure of Silin’s teachers to help him make meaningful connections to curriculum or to use curriculum that reflects his sexual identity and experience. If Freud was heavy-handed in his interpretation of Hans, it seems that Silin’s teachers exemplify the opposite stance: indifferent, unconcerned, even inert. Ironically, the effect is the same: both sets of adults seem to be repeating their own conflicts in relation to the other who is the child.

While there might be some benefit in thinking about how we could do better in our work with children than either Freud or Silin’s teachers did, or perhaps even become some child’s Louise, ultimately my thoughts about such possibilities are a little less consoling. What makes learning to read and write in the “invisible ink” of history so difficult is that it asks teachers to tolerate an unruly notion of history that cannot be laid to rest or settled once and for all. Here, the past is never simply a progress narrative or a chronology, but rather a presence that returns unbidden, and that both beckons and requires a working through of its repetitions in the classroom: How is the pedagogical present (one’s hopes and anxieties) structured by what has already happened? In what ways does the present shape what can be known as history? How can teachers distinguish between the child who stands before them and the child they themselves once were or wished to be? It is not that the answers to these questions can arm teachers against the disguised return of the past in their work with children. And it is not (as Freud’s rescue fantasy would have it) that in working through our own histories, teachers can somehow prevent the conflicts that constitute the conditions of becoming somebody. On the other hand,

neither does it follow that teachers can remain indifferent (as Silin's teachers did) as students struggle to narrate their histories, which, while not yet made, nonetheless demand a witness.

To work through and respond well to the conflicted conditions of our own becoming and of our students', we need to consider narratives, such as little Phillippe's or Hans's or Jonathan's, that contain the painful conflicts that make history, and to resist, as much as we can, the wish to prevent them with the right pedagogy or interpretation. Quite divergently, pedagogy resides in the tensions between the past and the present, between the history we can recall and its "invisible ink," and, if all goes well, in narrating the meeting point between "the adult in the child" and "the child in the adult." What allows for these conflicts to be meaningful is the teacher's capacity to symbolize them, rather than school them away, both in herself and in students.

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