

ANALYSIS

"The Echo and the Nemesis" (1950)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"Of the two stories showing young American women as 'innocents abroad' in Europe, one, 'The Echo and the Nemesis' (1956), is set in Heidelberg. Sue Ledbetter, one of the central characters, does not appear to be autobiographical, except in the sense that she, like Stafford, is a student at the university and shares some of Stafford's sense of dislocation. The ambience of Heidelberg and the student world there is, of course, drawn from Stafford's experience.

The story is apparently entirely fictional. Stafford has said that the other central character, Ramona Dunn, (whose name came from a character in an early version of 'A Winter's Tale'), was based on a roommate she once lived with in Cambridge who was a compulsive eater. Stafford also has written that the phrase *adiposa dolorosa*, which she read in a medical textbook, influenced her creation of the character: 'I think that 'sorrowful fat' must have stuck in my mind and that the adjective led to my invention of Ramona's despair and her concealing, consoling paranoia.' Whatever its origins, 'The Echo and the Nemesis' is one of the most profoundly disturbing of Stafford's works. As well as exploring Ramona's psychosis, the story implies that sexual perversion is the basis for it.

Sue and Ramona meet as American students at the University of Heidelberg. Sue, the 'innocent,' has come directly from America; Ramona, after a childhood in New York, has lived the past ten years with her family in Italy. Sue, whose father is dead, forms a somewhat inadvertent acquaintance with Ramona, because she is 'self-conscious and introverted and [does] not make friends easily.' She secretly envies the merrymaking of the other American students at her pension. Ramona, excessively intellectual, scorns those hijinks and spends the coffee hour they share endlessly discoursing on the esoterica of philology. One coffee hour, the radio music at the Jonditorei Luitpold suddenly shifts from the usual choruses from *William Tell* to 'Minuet in G,' a change that provokes a stream of confidences from Ramona, including a remark that her twin sister, Martha, had been dead for five years. She also suggests 'in tantalizing innuendoes' the infidelity of her parents. After detailing her mother's current affair, she seems 'on the point of disclosing her father's delinquencies when she [is] checked by a new mood, which [makes] her lower her head, flush,' and maintain a long silence.'

From this conversation, an intimacy develops on Ramona's part into which Sue is reluctantly drawn. Ramona, who is 'fat to the point of parody,' appoints Sue to oversee her agonizing battle with gluttony, which often makes her feel suicidal. Sue watches as Ramona's schizophrenia gradually emerges, in fits of abjectness, paranoia, rage, and in a mixture of lies and evasions about her family, her doctor, her sister Martha. It climaxes when Sue finds inscribed on the back of 'Martha's photograph, 'Martha Ramona Dunn at sixteen, Sorrento.' She recognizes Ramona's 'desperate fabrication' and supposes 'in a sense...the Martha side of Ramona Dunn *was* dead, dead and buried under layers and layers of fat.' Not aware of Sue's discovery, Ramona flings a final mad arrogance at her as Sue flees: 'Do you know what he said the last night when my name was Martha? The night he came into that room where the anemones were. He pretended that he was looking for a sheet of music. Specifically for a sonata for the harpsichord by Wilhelm Friedrich Bach.' The implication of Ramona's speech is that Martha 'died' because of an incestuous act, possibly with her father, whose memory caused her previously to flush and grow silent, or with one of her libertine brothers who had adored 'Martha.' Ramona's living death results from the degradation of her wealthy, Europeanized American family--the kind of evil explored by Henry James and no less forcefully portrayed by Stafford in her chilling revelation of Ramona's illness."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 43-45

"Another widely admired story was 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' in which Stafford mingled memories of Heidelberg with the tale of a struggle between two women student friends, one a compulsive eater. Martha Foley chose this latter for her 1951 anthology of best stories--the fourth time in seven years that she had included Stafford's work."

David Roberts
Jean Stafford: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1988) 292

"Another of Stafford's female characters who is preoccupied with her weight and rejects sexuality is Ramona Dunn, a compulsive eater in 'The Echo and the Nemesis.' Stafford suggests that Ramona has become obese to discourage males from making advances to her. Perhaps Stafford associated obesity with her own plump mother, for whose intellect she had great contempt, and thinness with her slight father, whose mind she admired.... A twin, Anne Cleveland was to serve as the model for the obese, compulsive eater Ramona Dunn in... 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' a tale in which a young woman invents a dead twin to represent a thin alter ego....

In an article she called 'The Art of Accepting Oneself,' which appeared in *Vogue* two years after 'The Echo and the Nemesis' was published in the *New Yorker*, Stafford speaks of her own conflicting states of mind: 'Ever since they graduated from baby talk to shape words, my two minds have been in steadfast dispute over the custody of their spawn of satellite minds; ceaselessly they argue such issues as country life versus city life, the east versus the west, society versus solitude...' 'The Echo and the Nemesis' dramatizes these two conflicting selves by contrasting the attitudes of Ramona and Sue.

Several other issues that were important in Stafford's life are dramatized in this story. Ramona's compulsive overeating may allude to Stafford's own dread of getting fat and also her own addiction to alcohol... Another function of the double protagonist in this story is to contrast the face Jean Stafford saw in the mirror at the time the story was written with that of her earlier self when she first visited Heidelberg. Ramona's photograph of her 'twin sister,' a young girl with 'pensive eyes' whose face 'wore a look of lovely wonder and remoteness, as if she were all disconnected spirit,' is similar to the one in Stafford's own graduation photograph, taken before her beautiful face was irreparably damaged in the car accident."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 28, 103, 203-04

"In 'The Echo and the Nemesis' (originally entitled 'The Nemesis'), which appeared in *The New Yorker* in December of 1950, Stafford pursued the theme of tyrannizing selves to a further extreme. It was another unusual story for the magazine, as Granville Hicks remarked in a review of Martha Foley's 1951 anthology of *Best American Short Stories*, where it was reprinted. 'Jean Stafford's "The Nemesis" on the other hand is a dark and sensitive study of psychological abnormality, not at all in the *New Yorker* vein,' he wrote. Stafford took a step beyond 'A Country Love Story,' this time probing full-fledged mental illness. The trouble was essentially the same--the lack of a self, the inability to lead a real life--and at first the story seems merely a variation on a familiar subject.

The protagonist, Sue Ledbetter, was another agonizingly shy American student in Germany who half yearned to join the boisterous youthful crowds but who was drawn instead into a friendship with Ramona Dunn, an imperiously pedantic student of philology--and 'fat to the point of parody.' Ramona 'did not seem to mind at all that she was so absurd to look at, and Sue, who was afire with ambitions and sick with conflict, admired her arrogant self-possession.' Dr. Cohn wrote to Stafford admiringly of the story: 'No doubt remains--your craftsmanship is superb. And so is your psychology.' He rightly observed the device of doubling signaled by the story's title: 'Sue and Ramona are mirror images, through a glass darkly, indeed very darkly, a dual person and so of course also one.' But the story took a further turn, as Stafford carried the doubling one level deeper: fat Ramona, suffering from *adiposis dolorosa*, cultivated schizophrenic delusions in her unhappiness--an unhappiness, the story hinted, that had its origins in incest. She fantasized a thin, dead twin named Martha, who was in fact her old self.

There was nothing wrong in Stafford's portrait of pathology as she unveiled layer after layer of Ramona's delusions in scenes so melodramatic they verged on dark comedy. In *Ramona*, Stafford vividly showed innocent Sue and her readers a more deranged version of the victim/tyrant relation than she ever had before. As Ramona announced to Sue at the end, 'I am exceptionally ill.' She spoke with pride, as if she were really saying, 'I am exceptionally talented....' Her obsessional appetite--her vanity and passionate self-devotion, to borrow the terms from Stafford's diary--led to deep unhappiness, yet once again Stafford complicated her story by suggesting that Sue's unvoracious outlook on life, her inability to lead a real life on her own, was hardly an ideal alternative. 'You have such a trivial little life, poor girl,' Ramona told her, and the story confirmed the verdict. 'It's not your fault. Most people do.'

Ominous though the stories were, Stafford's protagonists were young and her endings, however bleak, did not rule out all hope. In 'The Echo and the Nemesis' Sue--fleeing from a waiter who innocently asked her, 'Are you afraid to get fat?'--perhaps had an independent life ahead of her."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 275-76

"One of the most powerful stories to come out of the Heidelberg experience, 'The Echo and the Nemesis,' originally entitled 'The Nemesis,' appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1950. A study of female friendship, obsessive behavior, and the dual self Kate Chopin articulates in *The Awakening*, it also explores the schizophrenic split Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify as characteristic of much writing by and about women. This radical disunity in the female self consists of a public, conformist self and a private, subversive one expressing desires and appetites hidden from the world. Stafford's tale is the story of Sue Ledbetter and Ramona Dunn, Americans who are friends at the University of Heidelberg. Sue is naive, impressionable, and ordinary, while Ramona is overweight, intensely intellectual, and plagued with severe psychological problems. As the story unravels, the extent of Ramona's neurosis becomes painfully apparent. She invents a beautiful twin sister, Martha, who, Sue later discovers, is Ramona's former thin, beautiful self; tyrannizes Sue for her ordinariness; and ultimately retreats into her intellectuality, hurling insults at her frightened, escaping friend.

Certainly not typical *New Yorker* fare, the story echoes themes Stafford had dealt with earlier and on a larger canvas in her first novel *Boston Adventure*, notably the friendship and rivalry between Sonie Marburg, a plain, socially respectable young woman, and Hopeskill Mather, the beautiful, self-destructive, doomed rebel. Sonie yearns for the wealth and sophistication Hopeskill represents, just as Sue covets the European breeding of Ramona and her family. This Heidelberg story reflects Stafford's own lifelong problems with alcohol, her anorexic tendencies, and the disfiguring automobile accident she survived in 1938 with Robert Lowell at the wheel. Stafford's numerous facial reconstructions could never approximate her once classically beautiful face; this traumatic incident no doubt accounts for her sensitive portrayals of female obsession with the body and aging.

Told through third-person narration, 'The Echo and the Nemesis' was occasioned by Stafford's return to Germany and Heidelberg in 1949 and the inevitable confrontation she must have experienced between her present and former selves: the beautiful young woman she once was and the considerably changed Stafford of 10 years later. It also dramatizes other tensions Stafford felt in her life between solitude and society, intellectuality and domesticity, mind and body. Charlotte Goodman suggests that Stafford perhaps associates fatness with her anti-intellectual, domestic mother and thinness with her slight, intellectual father. Central to all of these themes is Stafford's preoccupation with identity: Sue vacillates between wanting to be a part of the students Ramona dismisses as Philistines and craving the detached, cerebral attitude Ramona evinces; Ramona constructs an impossibly romantic past for herself, complete with handsome, dissolute brothers, a beautiful mother, a dashing, philandering father, and a sickly, languishing sister who gazes soulfully out on the Riviera while playing the lute. Finally, these innocents abroad realize their common bond is their loneliness as the story leaves us to ponder the question Ann Hulbert formulates: '[Is] there any escape from this vision of life as a divided self, at once tyrant and victim, at the mercy of an unappeasable hunger for love?'"

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction

(Twayne 1996) 11-12

Michael Hollister (2020)