Language – Culture – Politics, Vol. 1/2017
ISSN 2450-3576

Malina Załużna-Łuczkiewicz

Secrets and silences – finding a voice to speak the unspeakable in Elizabeth Strout's *My Name is Lucy Barton*

State School of Higher Education in Chełm

Abstract

The article analyses the significance of silence and how the ability to speak is developed by the main character in *My Name is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout. The voice she finds not only enables her to talk about certain events from her past but also express herself as an artist. The paper draws on Frank Kermode's studies of memory and secrecy: *Secrets and Narrative Sequence*, *Memory* and *The Man in the Macintosh* as well as Esther Rashkin's psychoanalytically grounded analysis of secrecy. The paper aims to show that silence is the driving force of the narrative.

Keywords: *silence, secrecy, My Name is Lucy Barton, Elizabeth Strout, artistic expression, Frank Kermode, Esther Rashkin*

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje znaczenie ciszy i proces odzyskiwania głosu przez główną bohaterkę powieści Elizabeth Strout pt. *Mam na imię Lucy*. Odnaleziony głos pomaga bohaterce uporać się z własną przeszłością, a także znaleźć drogę do wyrażenia siebie w sposób twórczy. Artykuł odnosi się do esejów Franka Kermode'a, poruszających temat pamięci i sekretów: *Sekrety i narracyjne sekwencje*, *Pamięć* i *Człowiek w macintoshu* oraz osadzonej w tradycji krytyki psychoanalitycznej analizie znaczenia sekretów autorstwa Esther Rashkin. Artykuł ma na celu wykazanie, że cisza jest siłą napędową narracji w powieści.

Słowa kluczowe: *cisza, sekrety, Mam na imię Lucy, Elizabeth Strout, ekspresja artystyczna, Frank Kermode, Esther Rashkin*

Elizabeth Strout, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a short story collection *Olive Kitteridge* wrote a book in which she explores the themes that keep on recurring in her fiction: family relationships, haunting memories, secrecy and the quotidian hinging on broader issues like the implications of belonging to a certain social class, the toll of war and the Holocaust. *My Name is Lucy Barton*, published in January in 2016, received glowing reviews from critics in, among others, *Culture and Civilization*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker* praised as: beautifully unsentimental, masterly, tender and moving – to mention just a few of the epithets. This paper attempts to explore the question of silence, the never-said and the ways of finding a voice drawing on Frank Kermode's ideas of secrets and memory put forward in his essays *Secrets and Narrative Sequence*, *The Man in the Macintosh* and *Memory*. A psychoanalytically grounded approach developed by Elizabeth Rashkin in her book *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* will be utilised in the discussion of the main character's family relationships and the significance of writing.

The novel, unlike most Strout's books, is set in New York City and the plot revolves around the meeting of mother and daughter at the hospital bedside. After a long period of estrangement, Lucy's mother flies from a tiny town of Amgash to visit her daughter recovering after an appendix operation gone wrong in a New York hospital. The mother's stay is a pretext for their difficult reconciliation, which takes place as they spend a few days talking, mostly about other people's affairs; at the same time carefully avoiding the sensitive topic of their own dysfunctional family. Whenever touched on, the subject is dropped in fear or anger. Nonetheless through others' life stories they manage to say some important things about their own. The bedside reunion of mother and daughter lasts a few days but the scope of the novel is larger. The reader learns about Lucy's life through a series of flashbacks. The plot spans four decades – from the 1960s until the first decade of the 21st century. The reader follows Lucy from her poverty-stricken childhood in Amgash, through her college years, until adulthood – when she becomes successful writer and is in her forties.

Even on initial reading, the reader is struck by numerous silences or gaps in the narrative with the ending denying the satisfaction of closure. On many occasions the narrator, Lucy Barton, seems to have problems remembering certain occurrences from her childhood while other topics, for example, her marriage, she openly declares are the subjects she cannot talk about. Interestingly, Lucy Barton, is also a writer telling the reader her life story and at the same time reminiscing about struggling to write her first

book about the same thing. Events unfold filtered through the narrator's eyes, which increases the reader's suspicions about Lucy's lapses of memory and "an area of shadow", to quote Pierre Macherey, expands even more. The narrator, who seems to be baffled as to the reality of her memories, describes her own condition in the following way: "This must be the way most of us maneuver through the world, half knowing, half not, visited by memories that can't possibly be true. [...] So much of life seems speculation" (Strout, 2016, p. 14). According to Frank Kermode "[...] all narrators are unreliable, but some are more expressly so than others; the more unreliable they are, the more they can say that seems irrelevant to, or destructive of, the proprieties" (Kermode, 2003, p. 167). And it is no secret that first person narrators are the least trustworthy ones.

In his essay *The Man in the Macintosh* Frank Kermode puts forth an idea that the whole process of reading, like other acts of communication, is based on "the assumption that as readers we have to complete something capable of completion" (Kermode, 2003, p. 124). In other words, the reader expects a literary work to be a coherent whole with mysteries resolved and gaps filled when the book ends. However, if literature is to imitate life, in a narrative there should be some space provided for fortuity, accidental occurrences as well as "pointless jokes and deviant conundrums" (Kermode, 2003, p. 124). These strange inexplicable happenings, characters appearing in the text out of nowhere and disappearing without a trace like the man in the macintosh in Joyce's *Ulysses* are holes in the narrative resisting completion.

And, indeed, in *My Name is Lucy Barton* there seem to be a lot of gaps that cannot be filled in any way. However, they are not minute details that will be spotted by the most attentive readers, in fact, they are quite big gaps. By obtrusive repetitions of phrases like: "I don't know", "I can't remember, I think – but I don't know" or "Maybe that wasn't what my mother said" the narrator does not help the reader to determine what really happened in her life. A striking example of such kind could be a disturbing memory from her childhood. After Lucy's father caught his son dressing in women's clothes, he made the crying boy walk the main street of Amgash wearing high-heeled shoes, a bra and a string of pearls. The father was driving alongside in his truck "screaming that he was a fucking faggot and the world should know" (Strout, 2016, p. 119). This occurrence, just like the theme of homosexuality, reverberate throughout the novel. Lucy's neighbour, Jeremy, turns out to be gay and a victim of AIDS epidemic and gaunt men haunting the streets are a constant element in the New York cityscape of the 1980s. Lucy also witnesses a man dying of AIDS in the same hospital she is treated

in. The memory of her brother in women's clothes comes back when Lucy and her husband watch the march of gay men followed by their mothers who came to show support in the New York City Pride Parade. Her husband spots a grimace on Lucy's face, as she is reminded of her brother, and tries to comfort her. But what is the reader supposed to do with her comment: "I still am not sure it's a true memory, except I do know it, I think. I mean: It is true. Ask anyone who knew us" (Strout, 2016, p. 119)? Is the situation from the past so traumatic that it is too painful to remember? The reader never finds out. It is one of these numerous moments at which Lucy's grip on the reality of her memories seems tenuous.

There are more silences in the novel concerning the narrator's family history. As they chat their days away by Lucy's bed, her mother relates the stories about their acquaintances from Amgash and somehow almost every story is one of a failed marriage. However, not even once does she mention her own marriage or her disappointment with it; although living with Lucy's father – a veteran of World War II and a killer of two unarmed German teenagers – was far from peaceful. Her husband, a trauma survivor having have to deal with the haunting memories of his own past and suicidal thoughts, abused the children and could never keep a job, constantly getting into fights with his bosses. As for the nature of the abuse the reader is given only a few hints – Lucy mentions having felt disgust for her father most of her life. There is also something unnameable that she calls the *Thing* "meaning an incident of my father becoming very anxious and not in control of himself" (Strout, 2016, p. 31). She also remembers an urge she had as a child to come up to a stranger in the street and ask for help. On another occasion, Lucy freezes on hearing a story told by one of the participants of the creative writing workshop about a war veteran who compulsively masturbated himself in public. However, this story brings a sense of relief as well because she realizes other families had to go through the same thing as hers.

But the most terrifying memory of all is having been locked with a snake in her father's truck, when her parents went to work. In one of their conversations Lucy tries to remind her mother about this incident. "I don't know anything about a truck" – she responds (Strout, 2016, p. 67). And even years later, as an adult woman, the narrator talks about the snake in an incoherent way: "I could not bear to say the word, even now I can barely stand to say the word, and to tell anyone how frightened I was when I saw that I had been locked into a truck with such a long brown – And he moved so quickly. So quickly" (Strout, 2016, p. 68). Again it makes the reader question the reality of her memory, especially that the mother is surprised at

her mentioning the truck. It is another shadowy place in the narrative; a gap to be filled with varying interpretations. The snake could be a metaphor for the unspeakable – sexual abuse. It is also possible Lucy has never been locked in the truck. So it may be inferred, there were some very wrong things going on in this family but the exact nature of the abuse is only hinted at, sometimes in a figurative way.

There are silences in the relationship between Lucy and her mother, which seems strained at best. The two women have not seen each other for years before Lucy's hospitalization. Lucy wants to hear that her mother loves her but is never given the satisfaction. There is a moment when the narrator asks "Mommy, do you love me?" (Strout, 2016, p. 134) and her mother cannot say these words. Maternal affection is not manifested in other ways either. "I have no memory of my mother ever kissing me. She may have kissed me though; I may be wrong" – Lucy comments in a typically hazy manner (Strout, 2016, p. 139). Just like anybody in this family, the mother has some disturbing secrets in her past too. During her stay in New York, which lasts a few days, the mother never lies down, even when she's offered a cot. She insists on sleeping in an upright position explaining: "You learn to, when you don't feel safe. [...] You can always take a catnap sitting up" (Strout, 2016, p. 47). It is another unresolved mystery in the novel. In spite of numerous attempts, Lucy never finds out why her mother did not feel safe as a child. Her brother doesn't know what kind of danger she was exposed to either.

It is also possible to look at the secrets in this family from a psychoanalytical perspective. Both parents seem to heave deposited unwanted legacies on their children caused by their traumatic past. Such a phenomenon is called "transposition". It is a term coined by Judith Kestenberg, a psychiatrist who worked with the children of the Holocaust survivors. This phenomenon was also studied by Elizabeth Rashkin in *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* (Rashkin, 2008, p. 105). Although these children never experienced what their parents did, they felt traumatized by the secret buried in their parents' past and tended to identify themselves with their parents, their oppressors or rescuers. It seems to be the way to account for the strange behaviour of Lucy's brother, who never left his parents' home and sleeps in a barn, next to animals which are to be slaughtered on the next day. It could be interpreted as him acting out some horrors of war experienced by his father, whose life must have been threatened many times. Lucy, in turn, who has never been in the war, is frequently haunted by a dream in which she and her daughters are captured by the Nazis and are waiting to be taken to a gas chamber.

Although *My Name is Lucy Barton* is a personal story of mother-daughter reconciliation, it also pertains to broader issues. Vanessa Guignery in an introduction to the collection of essays titled *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English* observes: "Speech and silence are instruments of power, of self-assertion and self-definition: they take part in the constitution not only of an individual and his or her life story, but also of a group, a community, a nation, and their history" (Guignery, 2009, p. 6). One such wider issues is the question of poverty. At one point in the novel Lucy characterises her family in the following way: "We were trash. That's exactly what we were", for which she is angrily reproached by her mother, who adds that their ancestors were Pilgrim Fathers (Strout, 2016, p. 122). There is an air of secrecy about poverty too. Lucy cannot blot out the memories of her family having been ostracized and treated like pariahs by people in Amgash. She remembers how other kids would say their family stank. The fear with which passers-by react to her emaciated figure after the illness (apparently, thinking she's one of the people suffering from AIDS) reminds her of the fear she saw in other children's eyes when they thought she might take a seat next to them on a school bus. The haunting memories of numerous humiliations are the burden she carries with her, which results in her inability to believe that she can be loved. To make things worse, in her adult life nobody she knows can relate to her because they all come from families which were better-off. In fact, until a certain moment that could be called a turn in the novel, and will be discussed later, Lucy appears to be in a way speechless and crippled by her reduced circumstances and unable to act confidently.

In spite of having a profound impact on the characters in the novel, World War II and the Holocaust are also shrouded in silence. Lucy's mother explains that her husband never talked about the war because that wouldn't be decent (Strout, 2016, p. 32). The traumatized father makes the family life hell. Not until adulthood does Lucy find out that he shot two unarmed German boys and had qualms of conscience and suicidal thoughts all his life. But again, apart from her mother's telling remark at the hospital, the war is never mentioned in this family. A marble sculpture Lucy spots in the Metropolitan Museum of Art becomes a metaphor for the relationship between her father and his children. The statue shows a suffering man with children clinging at his feet. It is accompanied by the placard explaining: "these children are offering themselves as food for their father, he is being starved to death in prison, and these children only want one thing – to have their father's distress disappear. They will allow him – oh, happily, happily – to eat them" (Strout, 2016, p. 87). Lucy feels for

the sculptor and the author of the placard thinking "[...] So that guy knew". Hence, as indicated above, Lucy's relationship with her father is ambiguous – a mixture of disgust, hate and love.

Having been exposed to violence throughout her childhood the narrator is attracted to gentle and kind people who are also sad and have an air of secrecy about them. One of such people is her Jewish doctor. The man becomes a sort of father figure for her, "a friend of her soul" and "father-man". Unsurprisingly, he is scarred by World War II as well. His past is a secret revealed when Lucy overhears nurses whispering that he lost his family in the camps. She is immediately drawn to this man, "the doctor, who wore his sadness with such loveliness" (Strout, 2016, p. 61). She feels similar affinity with Sarah Payne, the writer on their first accidental encounter in a clothing store. "Perhaps I saw sadness in her too" – Lucy comments (Strout, 2016, p. 44). The writer is another sad keeper of secrets. After reading her novels, Lucy observes: "And then I realized that even in her books, she was not telling *exactly* the truth, she was always staying away from something. Why, she could barely say her name! And I felt I understood that too." (Strout, 2016, p. 46).

The family of Lucy's husband, William is also a repository of secrets. His German father forced to work on the farm belonging to an American farmer, after the war fled his country to escape with the farmer's wife and marry her. Although William's father expressed his disgust at what the Nazis did, it turns out that he came into a large inheritance from his father who profited at war. Unlike for her father, the German origin of her husband was never a problem for Lucy but what made her feel uneasy was the fact that William also accepted his father's inheritance, knowing where the money came from. He never articulated any doubts about it never being "the person who could speak easily of his feelings" (Strout, 2016, p. 149). The theme of Holocaust keeps on recurring in the narrative. Yellow stickers on the door that indicated a patient with AIDS was in the room remind Lucy of the yellow stars that the Nazis made the Jews wear. (Strout, 2016, p. 139). So few decades after its ending the war still holds sway and but all speech about what happened is stifled.

My Name is Lucy Barton features the narrator telling the reader her life story and also reminiscing about the times when she was trying to write a book. This kind of autobiographical writing, calls for a special moment called 'the turn' by John Sturrock in *The Language of Autobiography*, otherwise known as "epiphany", which is the moment when things fit into the right place and life becomes a complete whole (Sturrock, 1993, p. 286). As Kermode says in his essay titled *Memory*: "to communicate persuasively the experience of the turn it is necessary to practise an art" (Kermode, 2003, p. 298).

At the beginning of Lucy's literary career when her story gets published, she is called an artist by her friend, Jeremy. At that moment she is too shy to admit that she could be an artist. But since she is a writer struggling to express herself, the moment of epiphany can be identified in her life too. It occurs when she participates in the panel on which Sarah Payne is the speaker. After Payne is questioned about her novel, what ensues is a discussion about the difference between the narrative voice and the author's voice. The audience seem to mistake political views expressed by one of the characters in Payne's books for her own. It is important for Lucy because she has written stories before but the one she attempts to start writing is her most important one – in is a story about herself, Lucy Barton. The reason why it is this particular moment that triggers Lucy's own writing can be interpreted in different ways. Perhaps it is the realization that you can write about the most important thing – your life, including painful and humiliating moments and stay hidden behind a mask of a narrative persona. Maybe she feels inspired and encouraged by the fact that Sarah Payne stands up for herself in the discussion, even though at their previous meeting in a clothing store the writer came across as "ditzy" and shy. Lucy ends the recounting of the evening in the following way: "And so I began to record this story on that night. Parts of it. I began to try." (Strout, 2016, p. 99). She finds a voice for herself.

Another theme in this novel which calls for the psychoanalytical approach is the question of memory and the creative act in a traumatized person's life. In her book *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* Elizabeth Rashkin interprets *Babette's Feast* by Karen Blixen as the story of grief expressed through art, in this case – culinary art. Rashkin holds: "[...] artistic production is readable as a symptomatic response to an unspeakable trauma that poses an obstacle to being, and as performative attempt at self-cure that aims to overcome such an obstacle." (Rashkin, 2008, p. 42). Indeed, finding an artistic voice for herself heals Lucy and helps her define herself. It is parallel to some landmark decisions that she makes in her life. In an attempt to self-define herself, she decides to leave her husband without taking any money from him and start anew. She is also determined not to visit her relatives in Amgash. By no means is it peaceful resolution or a clean cut from the past. She still has some doubts about having left her husband, cherishes some good memories of their past together, never goes to Amgash but talks to her siblings on the phone and gives money to her sister. The awareness of having traumatized her daughters by divorcing William hangs heavily on her conscience too.

Rashkin in her analysis of *Babette's Feast* also makes an interesting point about the possibility of being cured by the consumption of art. (Rashkin, 2008, p.44) The supper that Babette cooks for the community lifts barriers between people. They open up and talk about the things which have been bothering them for many years. They purge themselves of bad memories, guilt and fear. It seems to hold true for Lucy Barton too, but in her case it is reading and not eating. She remembers that when she was a girl reading helped her feel less isolated. The most important book of her childhood told the story of a strange and unattractive girl called Tilly – clearly Lucy's double. So, as a writer she sets out on a mission: "I will write and people will not feel so alone!" (Strout, 2016, p. 24). Lucy is spurred to write a book about her life by another woman writer, Sarah Payne, in whom she recognizes a her own features. Sarah's shyness, her moments of weakness that Lucy witnesses during the workshop make her see similarities between herself and the writer. Thus, recognising a fellow sufferer in another human being helps Lucy make an artistic effort. It gives her a voice.). On the final pages of the book Lucy says: "But this is my story. And yet it is the story of many. [...] *Mommy.* Mom! But this is my story. This one. And my name is Lucy Barton." (Strout, 2016, p. 189). People fates are intertwined and mutually dependent but through this final sentence the narrator asserts herself, establishes her own, separate identity. So far the word "voice" to describe the way of breaking the silence has been used but, technically, the words are never spoken. Even after the publication of her first book, in an attempt to come to terms with her past, Lucy goes to see an analyst but she never actually talks about what she remembers. "I wrote down things that happened in my childhood home. I wrote down things I found out in my marriage. I wrote down things I could not say. She read them all and said, Thank you, Lucy. It will be okay." (Strout, 2016, p.161). An artist expresses themselves using the tools, they have mastered best – be it cooking, painting, sculpting or writing.

Silences and secrets are all-pervasive in *My Name is Lucy Barton* and they do not yield to interpretation easily. The reader is not rewarded with the clear picture of Lucy and her life when the novel ends. The crucial details of her past remain a mystery left for the reader to untangle. However, denying a satisfactory resolution is the strength of this novel, which seems to be in keeping with Pierre Macherey's observations about silence: "Thus, silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an inadequacy to be made up for. It's not a temporary silence that could be finally abolished [...] It is the juxtaposition and conflict of several meanings [...] this conflict is not resolved or absorbed, but simply displayed. [...] This silence gives it life" (Macherey, 1978, p. 84).

Bibliography

"Briefly Noted". (2016). In: *The New Yorker*. 1.II. 73.

Guignery, V. (2009). *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Kermode, F. (2003). *Pieces of My Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Macherey, P. (1978). *A Theory of Literary Production*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Moore F. (2016). "Visiting Hours". In: *Culture & Civilization*, III.

Rashkin, E. (2008). *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Strout, E. (2016). *My Name is Lucy Barton*. New York: Random House LLC.

Sturrock, J. (1993). *The Language of Autobiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Tripney, N. (2016). "My Name is Lucy Barton – review unspoken truths and new beginnings". In: *The Guardian*, 11. XII.

Tuhy, C. (2015). "What's a novelist to do?". In: *Publishers Weekly*, 7.XII.