

The Shell  
*Renewals of*  
and  
*Psychoanalysis*  
the Kernel

Volume I

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## Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology

N. Abraham, 1975

The belief that the spirits of the dead can return to haunt the living exists either as an accepted tenet or as a marginal conviction in all civilizations, ancient or modern. More often than not, the dead do not return to rejoin the living but rather to lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences. To be sure, all the departed may return, but some are destined to haunt: the dead who were shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave. From the brucolacs, the errant spirits of outcasts in ancient Greece, to the ghost of Hamlet's vengeful father, and on down to the rapping spirits of modern times, the theme of the dead—who, having suffered repression by their family or society, cannot enjoy, even in death, a state of authenticity—appears to be omnipresent (whether overtly expressed or disguised) on the fringes of religions and, failing that, in rational systems. It is a fact that the “phantom,” whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object's life. The phantom is therefore also a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.

Since the phantom is not related to the loss of an object of love, it cannot be considered the effect of unsuccessful mourning, as would be the

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case with melancholics or with all those who carry a tomb in themselves. It is the children's or descendants' lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. The phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active in the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact *within the love-object*.

Here we are in the realm of clinical psychoanalysis and still shrouded in obscurity, an obscurity, however, that the nocturnal being of phantoms (if only in the metapsychological sense) can, paradoxically, be called upon to clarify.

A resourceful and enthusiastic young scientist is filled with energy for his work, the comparative study of the morphology and microchemistry of human spermatozoa. During his lengthy analysis with a woman, he found a new hobby for his spare time, studying the genealogy of the high- and middle-rank nobility in Europe and its armorial variations. Given the identity of illegitimate children, he can on request trace anyone's origins to prestigious forebears. When I saw him after a break in his long years of analysis, he immediately insulted me in a fit of persecution: I was of low birth; I despised aristocrats and the nobility. Devoid of religious sentiment, I was a liberal conspiring against everything on which the nobility prides itself. I was indifferent to my origins; neither did I care that his be known and publicized. Instead, I was doing everything I could to destroy him since he laid claim to a world other than my own. A moment's hesitation. Then, he apologized for his excessive language. He did not really mean what he had just said so vehemently. His own father is a free-thinker. He hates genealogical inquiries. A man is worth what he is on his own. Why delve into the past? This, however, did not stop his father from marrying an aristocrat. And his grandfather? "Well, he died long before World War I when my father was still quite small. Grandmother always stayed with us. She had many children after my father, who was the eldest." The eldest of how many children? "I don't even know. There must have been a good dozen. They were mostly boys; all of them became important people. Do I know them? No, I never met them"; (confused) "oh, you know, it was all on account of my father's beliefs. . . . The family on his side deserted us. I am also the eldest and my name is the same as my father's middle name. In fact, it is also one of the Christian names of an uncle who must be the youngest of the boys. My first analysis? It was a wonderful analysis, very successful, except for the end. From time to time I would speak about myself with another very well known analyst, a man. He made a crucial remark that I immediately reported to my analyst. After that everything went along beautifully, except for the one thing which made me seem worthless and ridiculous to everybody: *my analyst refused to admit that I was the child she had had*

*with her prestigious colleague*. Then I became very anxious and left her. My parents? They are very fond of each other, they never fight. They help each other. My father is very busy in his plant. He puts herbal teas into airtight packages bearing the names of various eighteenth-century courtesans. He has won medals at various exhibitions."

Who could have failed to grasp in this speech what our subject does not know and must be covered with the veil of modesty: the fact that his father is a bastard who bears his mother's maiden name. An insignificant fact in itself, had it not led to a secret pain in the father and to his constructing an entire family romance about his aristocratic origins along with some efficiently repressed ill feelings toward his "whore" mother. The father's unconscious is focused on one thought: if my mother had not concealed the name of the illustrious lover whose son I am, I would not have to hide the degrading fact that I am an illegitimate child. How could this thought, alive in the father's unconscious, become transferred into the unconscious of his eldest son, everybody's favorite, and remain so active there as to provoke fits? Yes, viewed from any and every angle, the patient appears possessed not by his own unconscious but by someone else's. The father's family romance was a repressed fantasy: the initially restrained and finally delirious preoccupation of the patient seems to be the effect of being haunted by a phantom, itself due to the tomb enclosed within his father's psyche. The patient's delirium embodies this phantom and stages the verbal stirrings of a secret buried alive in the father's unconscious.

This is one case among several dozen others I have come to know. Can I begin to theorize? I am jotting down ideas as they come. The grand synthesis, if it is called for, will have to wait. . . . Perhaps I can say this much in the meantime. The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent's unconscious into the child's. Clearly, the phantom has a function different from dynamic repression. The phantom's periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in the sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography. The imaginings issuing from the presence of a stranger have nothing to do with fantasy strictly speaking. They neither preserve a topographical status quo nor announce a shift in it. Instead, by their gratuitousness in relation to the subject, they create the impression of surrealist flights of fancy or of *ouliipo*-like verbal feats.<sup>1</sup>

1. [OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle = Workshop for Potential Literature) is a research group of experimental writing founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François de Lionnais. The aim of the group is to invent "artificial" formal constraints (not

Thus, the phantom cannot even be recognized by the subject as evident in an "aha" experience and, during analysis, can only give rise to constructions with all their attendant uncertainties. The phantom may nevertheless be deconstructed by analytic construction, though this occurs without the patients' having the impression that they were in fact the subject of the analysis. It is clear that, in contrast to other types of cases, this work requires a genuine partnership between patient and analyst, the more so since the construction arrived at in this way bears no direct relation to the patient's own topography but concerns someone else's. The special difficulty of these analyses lies in the patient's horror at violating a parent's or a family's guarded secret, even though the secret's text and content are inscribed within the patient's own unconscious. The horror of transgression, in the strict sense of the term, is compounded by the risk of undermining the fictitious yet necessary integrity of the parental figure in question.

Let me offer, among others, one idea to explain the birth of a phantom. The phantom counteracts libidinal introjection; that is, it obstructs our perception of words as implicitly referring to their unconscious portion. In point of fact, the words used by the phantom to carry out its return (and which the child sensed in the parent) do not refer to a source of speech in the parent. Instead, they point to a gap, they refer to the unspeakable. In the parent's topography, these words play the crucial role of having to some extent stripped speech of its libidinal grounding. The phantom is summoned therefore, at the opportune moment, when it is recognized that a gap was transmitted to the subject with the result of barring him or her from the specific introjections he or she would seek at present. The presence of the phantom indicates the effects, on the descendants, of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents.

The difference between *the stranger incorporated* through suggestion and *the dead returning to haunt* does not necessarily come to the fore at first, precisely because both act as foreign bodies lodged within the subject. In classical analysis, an attempt is made to uncover the roots in a parental wish. While incorporation, which behaves like a post-hypnotic suggestion, may recede before appropriate forms of classical analysis, the phantom remains beyond the reach of the tools of classical analysis. The phantom will vanish only when its radically heterogeneous nature with respect to the subject is recognized, a subject to whom it at no time has

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unlike the traditional sonnet form or acrostics, for example) and to demonstrate that by applying them systematically, the potential scope of linguistic creation can be expanded. As in Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, semantic coherence is virtually never pursued.—Ed.]

any direct reference. In no way can the subject relate to the phantom as his or her own repressed experience, not even as an experience by incorporation. *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.*

A surprising fact gradually emerges: the work of the phantom coincides in every respect with Freud's description of the death instinct. First of all, it has no energy of its own; it cannot be "abreacted," merely designated. Second, it pursues its work of disarray in silence. Let us note that the phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression. Finally, it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization.

At best, phantom words of this kind can be invested with libido and determine the choice of hobbies, leisure activities, or professional pursuits. One carrier of a phantom became a nature lover on weekends, acting out the fate of his mother's beloved. The loved one had been denounced by the grandmother (an unspeakable and secret fact) and, having been sent to "break rocks" [*casser les cailloux* = do forced labor—*Trans.*], he later died in the gas chamber. What does our man do on weekends? A lover of geology, he "breaks rocks," catches butterflies, and proceeds to kill them in a can of cyanide.

Cases like this rarely provide sufficient material to "construct" the phantom purely on the basis of information gleaned from the patient. At times, the patient's surroundings quite accidentally reveal the nature of the missing pieces. Once we listen for the possibility of detecting a phantom, after having eliminated other explanations, it is usually possible to formulate some likely, if general, hypothesis. To take the example above, even without knowledge of the antecedents, one ends up noticing that the subject is possessed by a question of "forced labor." And though the story is entirely foreign to the subject himself, it does influence his habits and actions while, at the same time, running counter to his own desires. Often enough, patients need only feel that the analytic construction does not endanger their own topography; they need only sense, apart from any form of transference, an alliance with the analyst in order to eject a *bizarre foreign body*—and not the content of repression Freud called a *familiar stranger*. In this way, "the phantom effect" (in the form of acting out as well as other specific symptoms) will gradually fade. When the analyst offers a comment like "Somebody is breaking rocks," the patient no doubt notices the analyst's frame of mind and sees that the latter refrains from implicating the subject. The analyst implicitly signals the emergence of the stranger and thereby masters it.

Only in such cases can one reject the analytic stance that is typically, albeit here incongruously, bent on tracing the information received to

instincts or to the Oedipus complex. This would result in the patients' displaced acceptance of the phantom as part of their own libidinal life which could, in turn, lead to bizarre and even delirious acts.

In general, "phantomogenic" words become travesties and can be acted out or expressed in phobias of all kinds (such as impulse phobia), obsessions, restricted phantasmagorias or ones that take over the entire field of the subject's mental activities. In all cases, these words undo the system of relationships that, in an oedipal fashion, the libido is trying in vain to establish. The oedipal conflict is rather more acute in these cases than in others and can lead to the complacent use of the phantom as a guard against the Oedipus complex. This occurs sometimes at the close of the treatment when the phantom has already been successfully exorcised.

It is crucial to emphasize that the words giving sustenance to the phantom return to haunt from the unconscious. These are often the very words that rule an entire family's history and function as the tokens of its pitiable articulations.

Extending the idea of the phantom, it is reasonable to maintain that the "phantom effect" progressively fades during its transmission from one generation to the next and that, finally, it disappears. Yet, this is not at all the case when shared or complementary phantoms find a way of being established as social practices along the lines of *staged words* (as in the examples above). We must not lose sight of the fact that to stage a word—whether metaphorically, as an alloeme, or as a cryptonym—constitutes an attempt at exorcism, an attempt, that is, to relieve the unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm.

TEN

## Story of Fear: The Symptoms of Phobia—the Return of the Repressed or the Return of the Phantom?

M. Torok, 1975

They say that children are phobic by nature. Freud attributes this to the child's oedipal nature. The paradoxes of infantile libidinal desire force the child to seek repression. Yet ill-controlled repression fails to quell anxiety. In cases where the unabandoned libidinal desire returned victorious, the most dangerous of situations would materialize in its wake: namely castration, that is, the destruction of the very desire seeking victory. Hence, according to Freud, a solid fear (no matter how unreasoned, yet nameable, circumscribed, in addition to being easily managed in society, and regardless of whether the phobia is temporary or more permanent) seems to be a safety valve against the threat of pervasive anxiety. Certainly, the symptom has disadvantages unforeseen by its bearer; however, reason suggests that the advantages must outweigh the disadvantages.

We are in 1908. Phobia defends the ego against the indistinct threat of the return of the repressed. The threat itself appears to emerge along the oedipal path. Working through the Oedipus complex and castration, by means of affective transference, bringing to light the words of the desire as well as the prohibition, thereby freeing them both of anxiety—this is the alleged task of analysis. Psychoanalysis claims to effect the progressive enrichment of the ego by giving it access to its own repressed libidinal stock. Little Hans was supposed to have been rid of his uncomfortable symptom by an analysis of this type, which also seems to have

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