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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 13, No. 2, The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis (Winter, 1987), pp. 287-292

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343493>

Accessed: 11/08/2013 10:58

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

Nicolas Abraham

Translated by Nicholas Rand

The belief that the spirits of the dead can return to haunt the living exists either as a tenet or as a marginal conviction in all civilizations, whether ancient or modern. More often than not, the dead do not return to reunite the living with their loved ones 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 predestined to haunt: the dead who have been 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 that the concealment of some part of a loved one's life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.

This essay first appeared in French in 1975 and was collected in the author's *L'écorce et le noyau* (Paris, 1978). The subtitle is added here to indicate the status of this study within that collection. [Translator's note]

Critical Inquiry 13 (Winter 1987)

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Because the phantom is not related to the loss of a loved one, it cannot be considered the effect of unsuccessful mourning, as is the case of melancholics or of all those who carry a tomb within 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 within the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact *within the loved one*.

Here we are in the midst 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 spermatozoids. During his lengthy analysis with a woman, he discovers a new hobby for his free time: studying the genealogy of the high- and middle-rank nobility in Europe and its heraldic expression. Given the identity of illegitimate children, he can trace on request anyone's origins to prestigious forebears. When I receive him after a break in his long years of analysis, he immediately insults me in a fit of persecution: I am of low birth, despise aristocrats and the nobility. Not religious, I am a liberal conspiring against everything on which the nobility prides itself. I do not care about my origins; neither do I insist that his be known and publicized. Instead, I do everything I can to destroy him since he lays claim to a world other than my own. A moment's hesitation. Then, he apologizes for his lack of decorum. He does not really mean what he just said so vehemently. His father is quite a liberal. 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 the First World War when my father was still quite small. Grandmother had always stayed with us. She had had many children after my father who was the eldest. How much older than the others? I don't even know. Must have been twelve years or more. They were mostly boys; all of them became important people. Do I know them? No, I never knew them; (confused) oh, you

The most recently published book of essays by **Nicolas Abraham** (1919–75) is *Rythmes de l'oeuvre, de la traduction et de la psychanalyse* (1985). "Notes on the Phantom" is the preliminary statement of his theory of transgenerational haunting. **Nicholas Rand**, assistant professor of French at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is the English-language editor of Abraham's works.

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 which I instantly reported to my analyst. After that everything went along beautifully, except for the one thing which makes me seem worthless and ridiculous to everybody: *my analyst refuses to admit that I am the child she 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 been awarded several medals at exhibitions.

Who would have failed to grasp in this speech what our subject does not know, what must be covered with the veil of modesty: the fact that his father is a bastard who bears the name of his own mother. 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 hidden 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? In all respects and by all accounts, 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 the psyche of the father. 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 am fortunate enough 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-for-

mation 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 coming 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.¹

Thus, the phantom cannot even be recognized by the subject as evident in an "aha" experience. And during analysis it can only give rise to constructions with all their attendant uncertainties. It may nevertheless be deconstructed by analytic construction, though only by fostering the impression that the patient has in fact not been the subject of the analysis. It is understandable that, in contrast to other cases, this type of work requires a genuine partnership between patient and analyst: all 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 secrets, even though the secret's text and content are inscribed within the unconscious. The horror of transgressing, 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 which the phantom uses 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, that is, 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. Summoning the phantom occurs, therefore, as the recognition at the opportune moment of the gap transmitted to the subject with the result of barring him from specific introjections he seeks at present.

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

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 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 Millions de Poèmes*, semantic coherence is virtually never pursued. [Translator's note]

wish. Now, while incorporation, which behaves like a posthypnotic suggestion, recedes before appropriate forms of classical analysis, the phantom remains beyond the reach of traditional analysis. It will only vanish once we recognize its radically heterogeneous nature with respect to the subject—to whom it at no time bears any direct reference. In no way can the subject relate to it as his 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 in silence its work of disarray. Let us add 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, words of this kind can be invested with libido and can determine the choice of hobbies or leisure activities. Thus, 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), he died in the gas chamber. What does our man do on weekends? A lover of geology, he "breaks rocks," then catches butterflies which he proceeds to kill 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. As soon as we lend an ear to the possibility of detecting a phantom, and 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 a repression Freud had termed 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 his analyst's frame of

mind and the fact that the latter refrains from implicating the subject himself: 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 characteristically, albeit here incongruously, bent on tracing the information received to instincts or to the Oedipus complex. This would result in the patient's displaced acceptance of the phantom as part of his 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.

Taking the idea of the phantom somewhat further, 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 to be established as social practices along the lines of *staged words* (see 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, that is, an attempt to relieve the unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm.