

## Part V

# Secrets and Posterity: The Theory of the Transgenerational Phantom

*Editor's Note* Written and/or published in 1975, the essays in this section represent the final segment of Abraham and Torok's twenty years of collaboration. The concept of the transgenerational phantom, discovered and outlined for publication by Abraham in "Notes on the Phantom" (1975), is foreshadowed in much previous work, especially Torok's "The Meaning of 'Penis Envy' in Women" (1964), "The Illness of Mourning or the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse" (1968), and Abraham's "Introducing *The Filial Instinct*" (1972, to appear in volume 2 of this work). Abraham and Torok use the term "phantom" in a different though related context in the first paragraph of "The Lost Object—Me'" (1973); at its time of publication in 1975, the authors added an explanatory footnote, indicating the subsequent development of the theory of the phantom. Abraham devoted a seminar to the phantom at the Paris Psychoanalytic Institute in 1974–75; the preliminary notes for nine sessions were published in 1978 as "The Seminar on Dual Unity and the Phantom" (to appear in volume 2 of this work). In the 1980s Torok extended Abraham's theory of the phantom beyond her

initial contribution in the "Story of Fear" (1975), in order to outline the psychoanalysis of theoretical discourse in "Melanie Klein or Melanie Mell? The Vicissitudes of a Traumatic Name" (1982; to appear in volume 2 of this work) as well as in "What is Occult in Occultism? Between Sigmund Freud and Sergei Pankeiev—Wolf Man" (1983), reprinted as a postscript to the American edition of Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986). Rand and Torok introduced the first English-language publication of Abraham's "Notes on the Phantom" with an essay, "The Secret of Psychoanalysis: History Reads Theory," that sees the concept of the phantom as a way of analyzing the history of the psychoanalytic movement.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the phantom moves the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry beyond the individual being analyzed because it postulates that some people unwittingly inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestors' lives. The "phantom" represents a radical reorientation of Freudian and post-Freudian theories of psychopathology, since here symptoms do not spring from the individual's own life experiences but from someone else's psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets. Psychoanalysis in general defines personal identity by including in it the constant interruptions produced by the unconscious. Following Freud, the continuance of self acquires a paradoxical and discontinuous "unity," to be characterized as a form of shifting coherence attained despite disruptions. Abraham's theory of the phantom enlarges upon Freud's metapsychology by suggesting that the unsettling disruptions in the psychic life of one person can adversely and unconsciously affect someone else. Abraham likens the foreign presence to ventriloquism and calls it a "phantom," a "haunting," or a "phantomatic haunting." The concept of the phantom redraws the boundaries of psychopathology and extends the realm of possibilities for its cure by suggesting the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations, so that the analyst must listen for the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another.

The terms "phantom," "ghosts," and "revenants," as used by Abraham and Torok, derive from folklore. Giving psychological substance to age-old beliefs, Abraham seeks to broaden the scope of knowledge by introducing elements of irrational or nonrational imagination into the realm of rational understand-

1. *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 278–86.

ing. Thus the psychoanalytic idea of the phantom concurs, on the level of description, with Roman, Old-Norse, Germanic, and other lore, according to which only certain categories of the dead return to torment the living: those who were denied the rite of burial or died an unnatural, abnormal death, were criminals or outcasts, or suffered injustice in their lifetime. In Abraham's view, the dead do not return, but their lives' unfinished business is unconsciously handed down to their descendants. The peoples of antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages performed complicated funeral rites to insure a peaceful passage into the afterworld and to prevent the return of the dead. The cult of ancestors remains a common form of religion or tradition in some parts of the world today. One could say metaphorically that Abraham calls for a psychoanalytic cult of ancestors and a psychoanalytic form of honoring the dead with rightful burial. But in the psychoanalytic realm, laying the dead to rest and cultivating our ancestors implies uncovering their shameful secrets, understanding their nameless and undisclosed suffering. We should engage in this unveiling and understanding of the former existence of the dead not because we may want to appease them or prevent them from perpetrating their nocturnal pranks, but because, unsuspected, the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in us.

An illustration of the theory of the phantom may be found in Abraham's "The Phantom of Hamlet or the Sixth Act" (written in 1975, published in 1978), a fictive sequel in decasyllabic verse to Shakespeare's tragedy. Here Abraham interprets Shakespeare's play by casting new light on the old problem of Hamlet's indecision when faced with the task of avenging his father's murder. This had previously been the subject of psychoanalytic commentary by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and Ernest Jones in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). Both Freud and Jones attributed Hamlet's puzzling behavior to his unresolved Oedipus complex in relation to his dead father. Freud argued that Hamlet could not take revenge on his father's assassin because of his unconscious gratitude toward the person who accomplished the act he himself desired to perform. Using his theory of the phantom, Abraham suggests that the ghost, not Hamlet, is the primary object of interpretation. Hamlet is not tormented by conflicts or desires of his own making but by the consequences of a shameful secret his father took to the grave. Hamlet's indecision is the result of events which happened to someone else. In a more general sense, this conception

offers a complement or alternative to interpretive methods relying on Freud's ideas of sexually motivated individual complexes or fantasies. Abraham's interpretation of *Hamlet* adds the possibility of relating people and fictional characters to the (concealed) lives of their forebears. The concept of the phantom brings the idea and importance of family history, in particular the secret history of families, to the forefront of psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup>

While it is a distinct clinical and theoretical entity, the idea of the phantom is also a direct extension of Abraham and Torok's previous work on secrets and crypts (Part IV of this volume). The phantom represents the interpersonal and trans-generational consequences of silence. The concept of the crypt designates a secret psychic configuration arising from an individual's own life experiences; the idea of the phantom concerns itself with the unwitting reception of someone else's secret. Though manifest in one individual's psyche, the phantom eventually leads to the psychoanalysis *in absentia* of several generations (parents, grandparents, uncles, et al.) through the symptoms of a descendant.

The concept of the phantom may be contrasted with Freud's gradually evolving ideas about "archaic heritage," the inheritance of the actual primeval experiences of humankind. Often called by Freud "the phylogenetic derivation of the neuroses," "archaic heritage" is said to result from real ancestral occurrences—such as the observation of parental coitus, seduction, castration, parricide—that determine both the constitutional (as opposed to the individual) factor in the individual's disposition toward psychopathology and the uniform if not universal content of many neurotic fantasies and complexes. Clearly, for Freud as well as Abraham, the issue is the process of transmission which assures the survival of the memory traces derived from the experiences of earlier generations. However, Freud seeks to discover "mental antiquities," which, in the form

2. For a discussion of Abraham's work, see Nicholas Rand, "Family Romance or Family History? Psychoanalysis and Dramatic Invention in N. Abraham's *The Phantom of Hamlet*," *Diacritics* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 20–30. Torok and I edited a posthumous volume of Abraham's early essays of literary analysis *Rythmes: De l'oeuvre, de la traduction et de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985). I translated one essay from that volume, as "Psychoanalytic Esthetics: Time, Rhythm, and the Unconscious" (1962) *Diacritics* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 3–15, as well as the editors' "Postface." The entire volume is forthcoming in English at Stanford University Press.

of innate and invariable psychic matter, preserve the earliest periods of the beginnings of the human race in the individual of today. Abraham studies the unwitting transmission of secrets by one generation to another and sees the phantom as a function of the individual life experiences of the person who transmits it to his or her descendants. Such a transmission may occur at any given time in human history.

The idea of the phantom has implications beyond the study of individual psychology or even familial psychology. Aspects of this concept have the potential to illuminate the genesis of social institutions and may provide a new perspective for inquiring into the psychological roots of cultural patterns and political ideology. For example, a phantom can help account for the periodic return of political ideologies rendered shameful with the military defeat of their proponents. A case in point is the neo-Nazi movements of the 1980s and 1990s in Germany and elsewhere, which appeal, often inexplicably, to adolescents who obviously had no direct contact with wartime Nazi reality. The concept of the phantom gives one a basis for positing the unwitting transmission of shameful family history as the hidden motivating force that blindly drives some youths into movements modeled on the once openly glorified violence of their grandparents. Abraham and Torok's work enables us to understand how the falsification, ignorance, or disregard of the past—whether institutionalized by a totalitarian state (as in former East Germany) or practiced by parents and grandparents—is the breeding ground of the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of individuals, families, the community, and possibly even entire nations.

