

The Haunted Delimitation of Subjectivity in the Work of Nicolas Abraham

Translator's Preface

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“What use is the dual unity?” asks Nicolas Abraham (1919–75) in “Seminar on the Dual Unity and the Phantom.”¹ His response, reconstructed posthumously from fragments of notes following his untimely death in 1975, reflects on and utilizes a number of central concepts from two decades of work. Notions such as *anasemia*, *metaphor*, *introjection*, *trauma* and *the crypt*, developed in earlier texts, are used to elaborate more fully the mechanisms of self-formation as the always incomplete separation from a maternal context. This allows Abraham to explore different forms of this separation when the complexities of a child’s transition to individuation is complicated even further through the presence of what he names a *phantom*. This metapsychological figure is the culmination of a unique theoretical project, written mostly in collaboration with his partner Maria Torok (1925–98), to rethink the development and boundaries of selfhood alongside a similar interrogation of the psychoanalytic institution whose concepts and practice framed their work.

Considering the formation of self as inseparable from a notion of trauma and its symbolization, Abraham and Torok’s ideas emerged in one of the most turbulent yet fertile periods in the history of psychoanalysis, when Jacques Lacan’s incendiary thought was fracturing the French psychoanalytic scene. Working apart from the schisms and infighting that were paralyzing the accrediting institutions of psychoanalysis in France, they produced a theoretical corpus that unrelentingly challenged the dogma of the prevailing discourses of the day.² Cultivating this marginal position, they navigated more freely the liminal space where psychoanalysis borders associated disciplines (for example, philosophy, literature, and translation), attracting the attention of other radical psychoanalysts, philosophers, and theorists of literature. The seminars that they regularly held at their Paris apartment from the late 1950s were

attended by many of the prominent intellectual figures of the day, including most significantly Jacques Derrida. Suspicious of institutions and increasingly estranged from their intellectual milieu, Abraham and Torok embodied a spirit of psychoanalytic confrontation that characterizes their work.³ This provided momentum for them to challenge conceptual frames whenever they were inadequate to their object, while also promoting free dialogue in the face of constraint and preconception. These values were never more important than in their continual encounter with the question of trauma; a question profoundly traced into their personal histories as Jewish survivors of the Nazi “final solution” in their native Hungary.⁴

Trauma is an ever-present motif in the work of Abraham and Torok and the mechanisms of phantomic haunting developed in the Seminar are their last collective steps in investigating its impact on the individual. In a radical departure from the typical Oedipal models, they return to the origin of the psychoanalytic concept of trauma in the early work of Freud and the debates over its nature that were reignited in the 1920s and '30s by their compatriot and key influence, Sándor Ferenczi.⁵ Following Ferenczi's explorations in *Thalassa*, Abraham and Torok extend the idea of trauma beyond a simple pathological designation and connect it to the operation of the symbol that, for them, characterizes human existence. In their definition, trauma has nothing to do with the properties of an intrusive element—its strength, duration, internal or external source, etc.—but is instead determined by its effects on the subject. It is any experience that, for whatever reason, resists symbolization and cannot be transformed into a bearable aspect of being. Defined in its opposition to symbolic existence, it is thus the genesis and unrelenting motivation of all human activity. Synonymous with the constitution of the psyche, all symbolic manifestations therefore carry within them dispersed traces of repressed, life-threatening disasters, whether these wounded at the time of an event or through a deferred action.

It is in response to this conception of trauma that Abraham first defines the dual unity as a clinical concept whose purpose is to provide a supplement to analytic listening where established frames are lacking. He draws on the metaphorical function of the analytical process to describe the symbolic operation

at the heart of self-creation in general terms. Life is conceived as the continual elaboration and hence mediation of the psyche against the trauma of non-meaning, a process replicated in the analytic situation. The symbols that the analyst encounters are usually the fixed, stagnant monuments of a trauma that can only be repeated symptomatically. Abraham and Torok understand psychoanalytic method as finding new metaphors to overcome the moment—considered as originary although it refuses any antecedent status—when the symbol was separated from the complement required for it to articulate this first traumatic cut. This is a complement that has no status other than as the second element in a myth of original unity (Abraham evokes Plato’s androgyne), yet whose absent form is traced in the existing symbol as both the trauma and its possible overcoming. Finding the complement of a symbol (Abraham refers to this as the cosymbol) is the explicit aim of both life and psychoanalysis, although this can never be fully revealed. The (re)joining of symbol and complement produces the metaphoric level of articulation necessary to minimize the impediment of psychological obstructions and the traumas they evoke. Such a process of “metaphorization” is, of course, interminable, as the metaphor produced in joining symbol with cosymbol creates a new symbol that is itself separated from the missing complement required to mediate the trauma now retraced differently in its structure.

Abraham describes this metaphorical living in terms of the psychological process of introjection, which he defines as the laborious expansion and enriching of the interior world through the symbol.⁶ Noting how the pre-symbolic world of the child is mediated by the maternal object, introjection is modeled on and initially inseparable from a prior process of incorporation in which internalization is literal (the ingestion of milk) or a hallucinatory fantasy. The oral cavity is the locus of both incorporation and introjection, with the latter process separating from the former when the (initially vocal) symbol stands in for and mediates the absence of the satisfying object (the breast). The separation of introjection and incorporation provides for Abraham and Torok the twin operations that now characterize human life beyond the maternal environment. Introjection mediates reality symbolically, inflicting continual change on the psyche to

accommodate ever more sophisticated representations of experience. Conceiving of trauma as a gap that opens in the psyche through the absence or loss of a conciliatory object, introjection binds through increasingly effective metaphors the drive attached to a lost object so its energy can be recovered and the representation of the object internalized. Incorporation, on the other hand, maintains the psychical status quo by obstructing this symbolic function through a contrary process of “*demetaphorization* (taking literally what is only meant figuratively)” that deals with trauma by denying its existence.⁷ This happens when there is something in the experience of loss that prohibits it from being communicated—sexual abuse by a family member is exemplary—leaving an open wound of unbound drives in the psyche. Rendering introjection impossible, incorporation sutures the psychical gap by fantasizing a magical union with the lost object and thereby inserting an imaginary thing to claim omnipotent control of drives that have been rendered unspeakable. This creates a structure of silence around which symbols circulate to maintain and yet deny the secret they contain. This strange logic of hiding, which produces the trauma as much as it responds to it through the fracturing of symbolization, is designated by Abraham and Torok as the *crypt*. Drawing on the twin meanings of *crypt* as both tomb and a complex encoding process for keeping secrets hidden, the inserted imaginary object that correlates with that which is lost is buried alive with its own fantastical topography and never ceases its subversive action as the host psyche hangs with its life onto the pleasure it promises but cannot admit.

Abraham and Torok introduce the figure of the crypt to explain previously inexplicable symptomatic responses that have in common a sense of interminable mourning. These pathologies of mourning are exceptionally resilient to treatment—as Freud realized in his own experiences of treating melancholia—and demonstrate the limitations of classical technique as the loss mourned is “of a type that prohibits its being communicated.”⁸ The symbols that issue from patients in these cases are less the testament to an absent object that is mourned, as the denial that the object ever existed in the first place. For Abraham and Torok, traditional metapsychology was failing to account for this type of enigmatic and resistant symptomatology

that they were regularly encountering in patients. In their texts of the late 1960s, therefore, they undertook a renewal of psychoanalytic concepts, introducing a cryptographic terminology that included the *cryptonym* (a word that hides) and *cryptophoria* (the haunting effects of the crypt) to form a distinctive Gothic typology. A mode of reading that deals with the complexities of deeply encoded meaning and the failures of metaphorization was also developed underpinned by their foundational conception of *anasemia*; it finds its exemplary demonstration in Abraham and Torok's analysis of Freud's Wolf Man case in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*.⁹

The concept of the phantom developed in the Seminar extends this renewal of metapsychology even further to deal with the clinical effects of haunting when a trauma is not related to the history of the patient but derives instead from the secrets of ancestors transmitted down generations. This type of cryptophoria cannot be located in personal experience because "what haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left in us by the secrets of other."¹⁰ Passed on to us through relations of filiation, the effects of phantomic pathologies have clear ramifications for psychoanalytic practice as symptoms point to trauma in the lives of parents, grandparents, and even further back. Treatment must therefore analyze a collective psychology across generations that inhabits the patient in the present. It is to account for the mechanism of phantomic transmission that the Seminar introduces the notion of dual unity, and in doing so, an explanation of particular pathological cases opens up a notion of haunting that provides a more general condition for the emergence of the individual. Freud's famous decentering of subjectivity through the notion of the unconscious is displaced even further as a sense of coherent selfhood not only contends with the conflicts of infantile repressions but must also be maintained against the pre-personal traumas of those figures (present and absent) that form the milieu of our development.

For Abraham, the fundamental premise of the dual unity is that the child only ever separates from the mother incompletely and thus the boundaries of selfhood are always already permeated by the maternal. We are all "*mutilés de mere* (mother amputees)," both separate from and indissolubly linked to a

mother who inhabits our most intimate interior.¹¹ The mother is the complement to the child in the early dualistic union, mediating its drive life and providing the basic representations that allow for the construction of self-boundaries. The literal maternal complement is translated into “a whole stratification of maternal ‘imagos’” that form the basis of the dynamic unconscious as the infant makes the transition from the incorporative acquisition of reality to introjection through the symbol.¹² The dualistic mother-child union is transformed into the inner dualistic union between the unconscious and ego, as accession to the symbol is also the birth of the subject.

Abraham’s concept of dual unity makes it difficult to maintain the clear distinctions between normal and pathological processes in self-formation, as the purity of individuation is called into question. The words necessary for introjection are initially maternal words ripped from the specificity of the original duality to designate objects and events in the external world. Language attempts to grasp an objective pole of meaning to allow personal impulses to be named and a self constructed in a way that is unencumbered by the mother. The words used, however, are literally pieces of mother and as such are charged with the maternal unconscious. Far from mediating a clear separation, therefore, the symbols of introjection reveal “the impossible desire to cling on to the mother as much as the tendency to detach.”¹³[*ck final]

Introduced to account for the specific mechanism of phantomic transmission when a crypt in the maternal unconscious is transferred to the child, barring him or her from the introjection of certain experiences, the dual unity also presents a deeply compromised notion of subjectivity in which haunting by some foreign element outside the bounds of selfhood seems at some level inevitable

By highlighting the always already contaminated grounds of subjectivity, the dual unity begins to address some of the criticisms of Abraham and Torok’s work that have emerged in recent years, which seem to focus on how clearly they distinguish introjection from incorporation.¹⁴ A divergence in the critical traditions in Abraham and Torok’s wake hinges on the clarity of this distinction, with two theoretical positions resulting from the extension of their ideas to broader interpretative projects. On the one hand,

the works of Nicholas Rand and Esther Rashkin have sought to identify crypts and phantoms in various literary and cultural texts and to develop parallel methods of decrypting to expose and resolve them. Both maintain introjection and incorporation as separate processes where the latter creates pathological obstructions for reading to be rectified, and their development of interpretative models applies Abraham and Torok's concepts directly to non-clinical environments. On the other hand, a second tradition appropriates the work on the phantom in particular to the deconstructive project of Abraham's great friend Jacques Derrida. Derrida's concept of hauntology, which replaces the ontological notion of being's presence to itself (or its absence in negative ontologies) with the compromised figure of the ghost that is neither present or absent, transforms the pathological figure of the phantom into a general condition of subjectivity, but in doing so subsumes the specificity of Abraham and Torok's work. Previous issues of *diacritics* have been central in articulating this debate, not only introducing the importance of Abraham and Torok's thought to an English-speaking audience through key translations, but also publishing important texts on either side of their divided legacy.¹⁵ With the first of these critical receptions attempting to institutionalize a unique model of literary criticism and the second seeing these analytic principles as superseded, an impasse has been created in which the radical psychoanalytic spirit of Abraham and Torok's work is the victim. This accounts, perhaps, for the still incomplete translation of their work into English and the muted clinical reception it has received in anglophone countries.¹⁶

The translation of the Seminar, therefore, becomes all the more pertinent as it presents a more fluid encounter between normal and pathological processes that can enter into renewed dialogue with models of clinical practice and literary reading, as well as providing nuance and complication to notions of subjectivity such as Derrida's hauntology. It is the sense of continual renewal at the heart of Abraham and Torok's oeuvre that is also re-motivated and opens their concepts onto new fields of inquiry outside of their polarized reception. The Seminar, for example, intimates the possibility of phantomic transmission beyond the figure of the mother and speculates on the haunting of Freud by silences in his patient the Wolf Man.

Not only does this point to potential crypts in the Freudian institution, it also provides an important rejoinder to the dominance of Oedipal theory by examining causal structures of trauma that are beyond its scope and that do not follow its linear model of developmental repression. The impact of trauma on the subject can thus issue from anywhere in the history or prehistory of the individual and does not necessarily take the Oedipal scenario as its model. This re-imagining of the psychoanalytic frame has proven influential on the recent emergence of trauma theory, informing key texts in the field by Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys.¹⁷ An extended concept of the phantom has also been used to understand larger scale historical trauma and its impact on subjectivity and is an explicit reference in the works of Gabriele Schwab and Dominick LaCapra.¹⁸ This translation of the Seminar, therefore, touches on a number of contemporary debates in clinical psychoanalysis and beyond and can provide a source of support and ongoing reflection, as well as the impetus for potential theoretical renewal in the spirit of confrontation that Abraham and Torok first presented to psychoanalysis and its associated discourses .

Note on the translation

The Seminar was originally written as preliminary notes for a series of nine sessions delivered at the Société psychanalytique de Paris in 1974–75. It was composed posthumously by Maria Torok from fragments of these notes and recordings of the sessions, and published in French in 1978 by *Aubier-Flammarion* in *L'écorce et le noyau*. This original version has a short section interposed by Torok along with her explanatory footnotes. The edition I translate here is the 1996 version by *Champs-Flammarion* that includes further footnotes by Nicholas Rand, to which I also add my own notes on the translation to help frame and address some of the ambiguities in the text. To clarify who has written what, I have added initials to any notes as follows: Maria Torok-M.T.; Nicholas Rand-N.R.; and Tom Goodwin-T.G. All other text is by Nicolas Abraham. Where the French text indicates frequent breaks—it is now uncertain whether these relate to the delivery of the session or its reconstruction—I have chosen to remove these to aid the flow of reading, although this will inevitably give a sense of continuity that is less apparent in the original.

My great thanks to Professor Nicholas Rand for his encouragement and invaluable advice in translating this text.

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¹ Hereafter referred to as the Seminar.

² Abraham and Torok were largely ignored or treated with outright hostility by both the orthodox psychoanalysts of their member institution, the Société psychanalytique de Paris (SPP), and those members of the École freudienne de Paris (EFP) loyal to Lacan. A comprehensive account of their position in the history of French psychoanalysis can be found in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan and Co.*, 598–602.

³ This spirit would be realized in the *Confrontation* movement from 1973 (and its associated journal *Les Cahiers Confrontation* from 1979), when Abraham and Torok joined instigators René Major and Dominique Geahchan in establishing a forum and a series of seminar events to bring together members of the four official psychoanalytic institutions in France. This was initially intended to be a free and productive encounter between the different varieties of Freudianism “to speak of their dramas, conflicts, and works without having to initiate a split” (Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan and Co.*, 604). As the experiment grew, it also included non-psychoanalytic participants working at the margins of psychoanalytic discourse to explore the engagement between clinical material and concerns from associated disciplines.

⁴ Abraham and Torok both narrowly escaped the anti-Semitic violence that swept across their home nation with unrivalled vengeance as 800,000 Jews were murdered or deported to death camps in a matter of months. Their biographies are deeply marked by trauma as the rare survivors of decimated families. Torok alludes in one of her footnotes in the Seminar to Derrida’s concept of the *auto-in-analysé* of Freud’s text—the haunting of his text (in both form and content) by unanalyzed biographical details—a concept that is no

better utilized in examining their own oeuvre. {I don't quite follow this last sentence. Do you mean "a concept that is not better utilized than in examining their own oeuvre"??}

⁵ In the early history of psychoanalysis, Freud and Ferenczi argued over the status of trauma as real or fantasized. In this dispute, Freud had all but abandoned his theory of seduction—in which actual sexual intrusion is at the origin of psychopathology—with the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899. He increasingly retreated into the inner workings of the psyche, seeking causal explanation in the antagonisms that were played out in the arena of fantasy. Ferenczi, on the other hand, in his 1924 *Thalassa* re-ignited debate around Freud's controversial rejection of the aetiological significance of actual trauma by maintaining that any successful psychoanalysis would ultimately reveal a real catastrophe behind the veil of defensive representations in the individual.

⁶ For comprehensive descriptions of introjection and incorporation see Abraham and Torok, "Mourning or Melancholia."

⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹ The neologism *anasemia* (translating the French *anasémie*) is the term by which Abraham defines all authentic psychoanalytic concepts. Combining *ana* from the Greek for "up, back, again, anew" with a derivative of the Greek *sēma* pertaining to the production of meaning, it designates a discourse that has no reality or usage other than in its function of mediation between a shell of phenomenal sense (or conscious reality) and a kernel of non-sense whose continual displacement and disruption of the shell's meanings stands as their ever-deferred and traumatic origin. Between these realms, the distinctions between fiction and reality become more fluid, especially where clinical effectiveness is the purpose of interpretive construction.

¹⁰ Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom," 171.

¹¹ Abraham, "Seminar on the Dual Unity and the Phantom," ***

¹² Ibid., ***

¹³ Ibid., ***

¹⁴ Abraham and Torok's earlier text "Mourning or Melancholia" presents a clear distinction between introjection and incorporation—no doubt for reasons of exposition rather than reflecting the realities of their clinical work—and has been the basis of this criticism. Derrida was the first to highlight problems with maintaining these processes as separate in "Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok"; this has framed more recent commentary such as Christopher Lane, "The Testament of the Other," and Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature*.

¹⁵ Nicholas Rand's translation of Abraham's pivotal essay "The Shell and the Kernel" appeared in *diacritics* in 1979, the first of his texts to appear in English. It was accompanied by Derrida's essay on the translation, "Me-Psychoanalysis," and Peggy Kamuf's more general text on the influence of Abraham's work, "Abraham's Wake." More recently, in 1988, *diacritics* published a volume that collected Rand's translation of Abraham's "The Phantom of Hamlet or the Sixth Act" alongside two texts on the literary implications of his oeuvre: Rand's "Family Romance or Family History" and Rashkin's "Tools for a New Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism." Christopher Lane's critical reflections on the problematic distinction between introjection and incorporation and its impact on psychoanalytic interpretation was also published by *diacritics* in 1997 ("The Testament of the Other: Abraham and Torok's Failed Expiation of Ghosts").

¹⁶ It is only within the last few years that the work of Abraham and Torok has been emerging as a prominent reference in psychoanalytic texts in English and even then, this seems to be limited to practitioners ascribing to the Independent Group within the British psychoanalytic tradition and the newly emerging Relational Psychoanalysis in America. For recent books in the British tradition that cite Abraham and Torok and make use of their concepts, see Gregorio Kohon, *Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience*, and John Sklar, *Landscapes of the Dark*. Kohon explores the aesthetic experience in terms of the uncanny as this combines the familiar (the sense or meaning of an artistic production) with the deeply unfamiliar (that

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which unsettlingly demands our attention from beyond the circuit of hermeneutic recovery). He relates this to borderline experiences that move into realms more destabilizing than the return of the repressed in neurosis, and he uses the theories of Abraham and Torok to examine how “the experience of the uncanny produced by a work of art may evoke not so much the experience of a repressed event but the psychic confusion caused by unknown secrets that have not allowed the subject to live his or her own life. The traumatic is present in experiences that are impossible to know, to verbalise, to integrate” (*Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience*, 54). Sklar shares this view of trauma; his debt to Abraham and Torok is more implicit (although explicitly referenced) as he explores the interplay of history (the past event) and fantasy in the genesis and treatment of the traumatized psyche. For him, Oedipus alone cannot account for the traumatic landscapes of his title that result from rents in the ego. He turns instead to the Hungarian tradition of psychoanalysis from Ferenczi, through Michael Balint, to arrive at a model of the effects of trauma as silence, (cryptic) enactment, and regressive fragmentation that resemble the insights of Abraham and Torok who also emerge from the same psychoanalytic strand.

Four edited texts on dealing with trauma in the consulting room from a Relational Psychoanalytic Perspective were published by Routledge in the Relational Perspectives Book Series in 2016 and 2017. Examining the processes of interminable mourning in traumatized patients and recognizing the possibility of historical and trans-generational transmission, the work of Abraham and Torok forms one strand of enquiry that is ultimately subsumed to more familiar object-relations and interpersonal psychoanalytic theory. The titles, however, are clearly derivative of Abraham and Torok’s terminology: *Ghosts in the Consulting Room*, *Demons in the Consulting Room* (both edited by Adrienne Harris, Margery Kalb, and Susan Klebanoff), *Wounds of History* and *Trans-generation Trauma and the Other* (edited by Jill Salberg and Sue Grand).

¹⁷ See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, and Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Although there are fundamental differences between their arguments, especially regarding the implication of the subject in the traumatic

event (Caruth sees this as an external imposition, while Leys also examines the implication of the subject *in* the trauma through a hypnotic, mimetic gesture of identification), both situate trauma in the register of the unassimilable. What returns to haunt in traumatic memory or other effects of PTSD is not, therefore, an original act of violence that can be located in an individual's past but the very inability of this event to be located in personal history so that it encrypts in the psyche as a silence whose disruptions produce the uncanny sensations of something never known. The parallels with Abraham and Torok's notions of the crypt and phantom are clearly apparent.

¹⁸ See Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, and LaCapra, "History and Psychoanalysis." LaCapra uses Abraham's notion of the crypt to re-imagine historical self-understanding (personal and as a discipline) through the lens of the most destabilizing psychoanalytic concepts (or more specifically to bring psychoanalysis and history into a radically new engagement). The understanding of psyche and society in the present is tied to history in both the continuous form of linear narrative and the discontinuities that challenge and make this incomplete to produce a more haunted and cryptic historical account. In a similar way, Schwab focuses on the transmission of historical trauma by examining the limits of historical knowledge in the group and in the individual subject, interpreting discourse as violent historical acts that transfer unspeakable legacies down lines that are not only familial but also implicate communities and even nations. Her reference is the haunting effects of the Holocaust on the historical subjectivity of the German nation and its citizens, but her work also considers legacies of violence in other parts of the world.

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