The Ghosts of Auschwitz: Charlotte Delbo

Is the witness always false?

This chapter uses some of the insights from Abraham and Torok’s analysis of the phantom in a reading of the Holocaust testimony of Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo, in particular her remarkable short text *Spectres, mes compagnons*. Criticism that draws on the work of Abraham and Torok has attempted to uncover secrets embedded in texts, sometimes with spectacular success.¹ My suggestion in this chapter is that the secrets of Delbo’s *Spectres, mes compagnons* remain secret because they are not the narrator’s or author’s, but the unknown secrets of another. So Delbo’s haunted text is, I suggest, inhabited to a degree the witness cannot fully grasp by secrets which are not her own.

The key issue here is the extent to which the witness can understand her own testimony. The ghosts which haunt testimony may represent an impairment in self-understanding. Abraham and Torok raise the question of the truthfulness of the witness in one of the chapter headings of their book on Freud’s Wolf Man, *Le Verbier de l’homme aux loups*: ‘Is a witness always false? [Un témoin est-il toujours faux?]’. They describe the dilemma of the Wolf Man when he is asked by Freud to confirm that the famous dream of the wolves actually took place in his childhood. In Abraham and Torok’s interpretation, the dream bears witness – falsely, according to Freud and Wolf Man’s family – to his father’s sexual abuse of his sister. For the adult Wolf Man, to testify that the dream occurred in childhood is to confirm that he had made false allegations in
the past; but to deny it would be to retract his earlier claims, and so also to confess that he was an unreliable witness. As Abraham and Torok summarise his dilemma, ‘for him all testimony, whatever it might be, was tantamount to a lie’. However truthful he attempts to be, he is condemned to ensconce himself in the position of false witness because he does not control the meaning of his own testimony.

The problem of the witness’s impaired understanding of her own testimony is compounded by the presence of ghosts. Here also, the reading of Delbo undertaken draws on the work of Abraham and Torok. As we saw in the previous chapter, in Abraham and Torok’s account the phantom is not to be understood as a return of the repressed, or at least not of material repressed by the person haunted by the phantom. Rather, they posit the operation of unconscious, transgenerational communication, so that the secrets and crimes of past generations can be deposited in the unconscious without the subject ever having been conscious of them. So the phantom is the other within the self, inaccessible to introspection or analysis because the subject does not even know that it is there. Moreover, the consequences of haunting on the life of the haunted subject may be disastrous. The phantom’s residence in the unconscious results from an injunction to maintain secrecy over some unspeakable crime, so its interventions and ruses are designed to protect a terrible secret. The phantom, then, is a liar, it does not return to restore the truth but on the contrary to prevent some shameful secret from being discovered.

Recent trauma studies, following the lead of Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, have made familiar the notion that traumatic experiences are lived as if they were happening to someone else, so that they do not seem to belong to the traumatised subject. Abraham and Torok take this a step further. The trauma which affects me may indeed literally be someone else’s, since it arises from the unconscious re-activation of an other’s experience:

We tend to assimilate trauma to an orgasm-like experience originating in the rapid opening of the Unconscious. Yet it is not certain that such an orgasm, even as an analogy, is involved in trauma. On the contrary, what is more probable is that there is an opening, real or fictive, of the Unconscious during or after the trauma, with the power to awaken a phantom which is working away inside it.