

A Dark Secret

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On March 7, 2018, a production of *Sprawiedliwość* (Justice) directed by Michał Zadara premiered at the Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw. It presented a fake trial with arguments supporting the thesis that the persecution and repression suffered by Polish citizens of Jewish origin were, in fact, an “expulsion” carried out by the Polish state and thus, under the law in force then and now in Europe, remains a still unjudged wrong-doing that can be qualified as a “crime against humanity.” It was probably the first time we had encountered such a qualification of this event. The accusation was made even more dramatic by the fact that the fiftieth anniversary of March ’68 coincided with the debate on the scandalous Act – it is difficult to call it otherwise – on the Institute of National Remembrance and the proposed penalization of statements about the co-partic-

ipation of Polish citizens in Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich, including the extermination of Jews, as statements defaming the good name of the Polish nation. In building their argument about the necessity of judging those events, the actors in Zadara's performance used the story of King Oedipus presented in Sophocles' drama. As we remember, even though the oracle announced that famine and pestilence would ravage the city until the murderer of the previous king Laius was found, the crime remained a household secret in Thebes for some time and, importantly, a guarded secret. "Why has no one looked for the perpetrator?" the actors ask from the stage. "Because they sense that the truth will upset the status quo, their tenuous stability. Because they sense that their state is built on crime. And no one wants to look that truth in the eye." "But until the perpetrators are found and tried, nothing will change in this country. It will always be the same." At the end of the performance we hear: "It was worth telling the story of March '68 and admitting the fact that the perpetrators will never be brought to justice. And that it will not be like in *Oedipus*; this matter will always hang over Poland." Meanwhile, in today's Poland "it is like in *Oedipus*, everyone knows it, but no one takes any action." Maybe it is better this way? "In the end, the king is blind and his wife hangs from a dress cord in their bedroom. After this investigation, Thebes will be plunged into war for another generation. What do they get out of it, out of this whole *Oedipus* investigation?" "Justice," is the reply.

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We will talk here about the role of a secret in the life of the community and about those who reveal these secrets. A secret is always hidden knowledge, and we can learn about how hidden when we refer to etymology. The word “secret” is related to the word “excrement”. Secret and excrement come from the Latin verb *cernere*, *crevi*, *cretum*, whose active Indo-European root is *krei*, meaning to separate, sift, distinguish. The prefix *se* refers to the procedure of separating, rationing, allotting, setting aside (Latin: *secernere*), and is what connects a secret or mystery with separating. Therefore, a secret is something that connects the process of separation, the decision to do so, and the separated element. I will discuss it later.

Being concealment of how things are, a secret is not a lie, but a procedure performed on the distribution of our knowledge of the world, and simultaneously, a procedure that is often performed on the truth. In European culture, truth is a regulative idea for the functioning of societies, but in addition to defining the very idea and nature of truth, European philosophy – especially social and political philosophy – from the beginning has devoted much attention to the question of the distribution and economy of both knowledge and truth. Many ethicists and philosophers of politics have taken the position that truth must be communicated with care and respect for the interests and welfare of the individual and the community (the latter two criteria proving to

be, if not contradictory, often mutually incompatible). This position meant rationing knowledge and limiting truthfulness. In its practice, an important role is played by the principle of discretion, the principle of keeping secrets and communicating the truth for the benefit of the individual or the community. This is a principle of conduct known from time immemorial. We encounter its application also in our native culture: “There are truths that a wise man tells to all men / There are those he whispers to his people; / There are those he confides to his friends at home; / There are those he cannot reveal to anyone,” said Adam Mickiewicz in *Zdania i uwagi* (Sentences and Remarks) [379]. Thirty years later, Nietzsche, in the volume *Human, All-too-Human* expanded its field of application and wrote that “convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies” [179] – he expanded it because usually we believe that our convictions are true.

Poets and philosophers were soon joined by representatives of the social sciences. Georg Simmel makes a secret an essential component of both the private and the public sphere.¹ A secret plays a significant, even key role in the process of individualization of both the individual and the community, and, thus, in the process of creating its identity. Our convictions, ideas and expectations about the relationships between us make our common world understandable and build mutual trust. But our under-

1 I refer here to Georg Simmel's text *The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies* [227–283]. These issues presented in different areas of social life are also discussed in Sissela Bok's book [333].

standing of the world also defines the nature of those relationships. Simmel points to the dual character of these relationships: accord, harmony, cooperation must be balanced by distance, accentuated forms of ignorance, figures of alienation, competition, and even some forms of discrimination, because these factors are necessary to create the proper configuration of society. The condition of good relationships with others appears to be the veil of ignorance and the principle of respect for mutual non-transparency. Strong ties are derived from ignorance sanctioned as a natural state. They are the result of intentional concealment and vigilance about the security of what constitutes that secret deposit. But this means that Simmel's secret is often a public secret, and respecting it is a situation shared by everyone, constituting a social habitus. To keep a secret is to become trustworthy. Our knowledge and voluntary ignorance equally work for our sense of security in the community. For Simmel, mutual trust is the strongest bond of a community and also something that secures understanding. Trust, Simmel says, makes us predictable and compliant to one another. It mediates between our knowledge and ignorance. They who know with certainty do not need to rely on their trust; those who know little or nothing at all rely on their trust and do not seek rational justification. They are satisfied with a sense of security, a feeling of identification and being at home that produce the bond of intimate agreement about the imponderables adored together; those "vague things" that regulate the affective economy of the parent community.

Imponderables, too, are shrouded in a veil of discretion, more so than real secrets, that is, concealed facts and information. And this happens for a reason, because – as we know – vague things furnish the phantasmagoric scenario that sustains the identity of the person and the community. It is them that create the “unsymbolizable kernel in the other: the *object a* [for example: the allure of innocent Polishness eternally threatened by history – M.Z.]. It is around this object that the subject forms its fantasy, its scenario of provisional wholeness,” observes Renata Salecl [120]. Therefore, its kernel remains that which is difficult to symbolize and articulate, which refers to the endless number of its substitutions that are yet another warp of created representations and imaginings. Talking about intimate things is difficult precisely because *object a* generates an affective field: arguments are, in fact, secondary here.

A violation of the sphere shrouded in secrecy is treated as a breach of the social contract: in the individual case – as damage to the dignity and honor of the individual; in the collective – as an attack on the good name of the community. The more strongly guarded a secret becomes, the more it is threatened with disclosure. Its defense is driven by the energy of collective narcissism: the defensive reflex is directed against the “other” who is considered a demonic enemy of the community. It is in the name of the “other” that the one who reveals domestic secrets acts, especially those that arouse shame and

trepidation, because they concern episodes in the history of the community that are not very praiseworthy or even shameful. In this way, the secret, gaining significance as something that permanently forms the community, becomes part of the world of intimate attachments, the aforementioned “vague things”. They must be loyally guarded, because their violation means the catastrophe of the community.

The dynamics of the social constitution of the explicit and the implicit has not lost its value today, although – one could say – significant changes have taken place. And so, for example, the recommendation “be silent then, for danger is in words” from *Doctor Faustus*, along with Simmel’s rule of discretion formed in the times of Wilhelmine Germany, already resonate perversely and ominously. Mickiewicz’s admonition quoted earlier from *Zdania i uwagi* or Simmel’s principle of discretion have not so much been devalued in our more recent times as they have been appropriated by the modern state; not only by the totalitarian state – the new Leviathan – but also by the liberal democracies dying out in the global oikumene created by the post-capitalist empire described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. When power is wielded by those who control information, the secret (perhaps more than ever), as Giorgio Agamben puts it, becomes a cipher and an arcanum of power, a hidden form of sovereignty and, thus, a form of violence [Garrison 285]. Agamben believes that sov-

ereignty is the management of the mystery of dividing and separating.

In postmodern society, we are dealing with the principle, which had already been noted by Simmel: what is public is becoming more and more public, and what is private is expanding and also becoming increasingly private in the public perception. This is the effect of the unprecedented role of the share of information in our lives, but also of the narcissism of small differences, which is increasingly active in social life: the less important or more evanescent great social differences become (or at least, the less importance they are ascribed to in the debate), the more secondary and tertiary issues become the focus of attention in the macro-scale of social and political life, however, they are charged with a great affective load and regarded as symbolic. In Poland, which today is in the time of a hot cultural war and a state of a creeping systemic revolution, it seems that all of the aforementioned vectors of power are active. That is why there is no real debate in Poland and those who betray household secrets and profane imponderables – according to the guardians of the community – are ostracized in the appropriated public media. This arouses holy indignation, all the more so because – as I have already mentioned – these imponderables are easily compromised as content that is essentially intimate to the point of being “extimate” (existing beyond the competence of discourse). Thus, they commit the most monstrous crime, because they do it on the defenseless and pure

emotions of the community. They are not only dissidents, but also blasphemers: they turn – how dreadful! – against the symbolic community supposedly established beyond divisions.²

No matter how severe the administrative sanctions, the action of the defenders of household secrets is doomed to failure from the outset. The result of sharing is, as it were, twofold: it requires at least two parties involved. “The strange economy of secret is that it must be shared if it is to be a secret” [Kronick 18]. Members of a divided community keep proprietary information to themselves, but to speak of secrecy or confidentiality of information most often means that the information could not be kept secret and has already been obtained by the other party [Marx and Muschert 7]. The fascination with a secret, of which Simmel wrote, means that the more it is guarded, the less secure it remains. From the beginning, the tension between concealing and revealing a secret has also been the focus of psychoanalysis. Its area, hermeneutics, regards the figures of strangeness, otherness, but also ignorance (and, thus, confronting them) as inevitable and desirable: they participate in the working out of individual and collective identity. “Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear will soon convince themselves that mortals cannot hide any secret. If our lips are sealed we talk volubly with our fingertips; we betray ourselves through every pore,” wrote Sigmund Freud in his analysis of the case of Dora [66]. He paid some attention to the secret in *The Uncan-*

2 What is at work here is an illusory promise, and if need be, a deterrent: “Because all Poles are one family”.

ny (1919). In this famous treatise, he pointed to the effect of dissociation caused by the disclosure of a secret, but the considerations he initiated were significantly complemented and developed in the works of his followers, above all, in the 1970s texts of a couple of Hungarian psychoanalysts, Mária Török and Nicolas Abraham, and in the commentaries of their successors. According to them, the work of concealing and guarding a secret shares an affinity with the work of the death drive, and the role that the specter, the phantom of the dead, and the presence of traumatic experience all play in the psyche of the living.³ The death drive, the phantom, and the secret remain hidden: they are shrouded in a veil of silence, they reside beyond words. The death drive, directed inward by the subject and, thus, existing in latency, is sometimes redirected outward and expresses itself in the form of destructive aggression. What is important, and what Török and Abraham emphasize, is that what returns spectrally is often a particular form of the unconscious; its form which is never conscious, and which still remains to be described because it is the result of the transition from the unconscious of the parents to the unconscious of the child. It should be added here that Török and Abraham initiated research on the transgenerational inheritance of trauma and traumatic experiences, including – what is of particular interest for us here in Poland – the intergenerational transmission of family or collective secrets. Török and Abraham believe that the work that the phantom does in

3 These clues pointed out by Török and Abraham were observed by the anonymous author of the entry “secret” posted on NoSubject.com. I owe my reading inspiration in this part of the article and the very interpretation of the specter-phantom status to this hint.

the mental life of a living person takes place in the subconscious that hides a secret inaccessible to others. The phantoms that haunt us are “the gaps left in us by the secrets of others” [107]. The result is that specters, phantoms, and ghosts are part of our lives; they are riddles, secrets of our existence that we cannot fully access because they are transmissions of the trauma of previous generations. Ghosts are phantasms of our ignorance about ourselves; or – once something has penetrated our consciousness – phantasms of knowledge that is bitter, traumatizing to us, and, therefore, unwanted. They appear as something that remains repressed; they come from the dimension of what is gone but not buried, or not buried completely – from the world of unfinished mourning. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the rise of interest in what remains secret in intergenerational inheritance, and the growth of related research, dates back to the 1970s. The same period saw the intensification of research on the Holocaust and the appearance of the topic of the Holocaust in mass culture. In Poland, all this was delayed by almost two decades, but now the record of the transgenerational trauma finds its realization, not only academic, but also literary, and even in mainstream circulation; suffice it to mention novels nominated for literary awards, such as *Noc żywych Żydów* (The Night of the Living Jews) by Igor Ostachowicz, *Czarne liście* (Black Leaves) by Maja Wolny or *Duchy Jeremiego* (Ghosts of Jeremy) by Robert Rient.

The phantom, thus, encrypts that which remains secret, unspoken, or forbidden to appear in intergenerational

discourse. Stephen Frosh, a contemporary commentator and continuator of the research launched by Török and Abraham, observes that the phantom reveals itself as the speech of a ventriloquist: haunted by ghosts, he begins to talk about the silenced crimes of the previous generation [cf. Campbell]. One might say that the phantom encrypts the secret and the shame associated with it. As the commentators of Török and Abraham point out, the phantom is the work of the unconscious as the habitat of the forbidden secret of the Other (the ostentatiously performed incest, the collective crime, the unpunished transgression). It enforces ignorance, manifests itself as fear, bizarre speech and such acts (phobic, obsessive behavior, etc.). The spectral universe can materialize through often unreal stories. It produces a sensation that Freud referred to as the “uncanny”.

The spectral work described here is the affect-induced work on symbols, the fantasy work of the haunted subject. Here Török and Abraham point to two possible outcomes of this process. The first consists in the incorporation of the phantom (and, simultaneously, of the secret), a phantasmic incorporation, which is the result of a “conservative displacement”: the phantom becomes encased with defensive meanings in the subject’s phantasmic work, which amounts to a refusal to identify with the phantom as object and maintains the subject’s “metapsychic” status quo. This means a failure to decipher the secret of the phantom. But, for example, this is also what happens in the case of the failed introjection of the lost object, the

unsuccessful work of mourning, or the refusal to mourn. Török and Abraham refer to the incorporation of the object as “endocryptic” identification: inside the ego (self) of the subject, a setting called “crypt” is installed in the unconscious of the subject. It is there that the phantom takes up residence as a skeleton in the closet or sometimes as an “exquisite corpse” (as Jacques Derrida, echoing Török, calls this object in his introduction to an earlier book by the Hungarian authors) [Derrida 129].⁴ The crypt is also the stage of a particular speech: “The walls of the crypt are built by the contradictory feelings of love and hate represented in the cryptonyms, the words that hide.” [“Hieroglyphics of sleep and pain”]. While introjection assimilates the object affecting the subject, incorporation is its “ingestion”. Using colloquial metaphors, one can say that the object “ingested” in this way gets stuck in one’s throat. Treated in this way, the object is stored in the crypt (belonging to the subject’s psychic topography) as a living, though alien presence. This means an obvious discomfort similar to the painful longing for a lost loved one, or a neighborhood constantly threatened by an enemy, or someone who causes us pangs of conscience. Not going into mourning or unhealed guilt secretly raise an enigmatic tomb inside the subject. The correlative of the loss or trauma, staged from recurring words, scenes or emotions, is deposited in the crypt, like a person with all their belongings. The crypt is thus a place inhabited by what traumatizes and disturbs us. It remains a place

4 This is the preface to the French edition of the book by N. Abraham and M. Török, *Criptonymie. Le Verbiere de l’homme aux loups*. Derrida refers to a melancholic lost object, not a traumatic object as in the case of victims of mass crimes.

of quarantine for the virus infecting the subject, a place of seclusion through which the “self” of the haunted subject finds a sense of security. However, as the history of places of seclusion suggests, this is a rather makeshift and ambiguous solution. Isolation in a place of solitary confinement, as we know from the history of penitentiary practices, is only an ad hoc measure; re-education of the inmate is desirable. It is similar, in this case. The crypt exists thanks to repression, while it is introjection that is desirable, the reworking of trauma, the assimilation of the lost or feared object allowing for cohabitation, making it part of the topography of one’s own memory. There is one more reason why incorporation turns out to be a makeshift solution, and that is due to the defensive functions of the “ego” and the language active in the organization of “psychic cryptophore”, as Derrida points out in the aforementioned preface: “Ego: guardian of the cemetery. The crypt in him is a foreign place, forbidden, excluded. He is not the owner of what he guards. He makes his rounds like the owner, but it is only a round. He circles around, and above all, uses all his knowledge of these places to deceive the visitors. »He lingers there to supervise the entrances and exits of the immediate family, who pretend – in various ways – that they have access to the grave. If he consents to the entry of the curious, the vermin, the detectives, it is only to prepare false paths and bogus tombs for them«” [153–154].

As we can see, this kind of traumatic domestication is not just a kind of manipulation performed on oneself and oth-

ers – a manipulation that can easily become a lie committed in the name of a higher necessity. The confusion of which the philosopher and psychoanalysts speak is exploited by those who usurp the role of keepers of domestic secrets. The protest they incite, most often as a discourse of moral panic, reduces the shame of the “unjustly” accused, revives and satisfies the desire that numbs in the cold of the crypt. As Török and Abraham argue, the crypt can be passed on to future generations. And it usually is. We inherit someone else’s nostalgias, melancholies, phobias, and neuroses as our own.

The fantasy of incorporation that revives the subject’s desire, which quails in the face of the scary figures of the Real, acts as an analgesic, but as I have already said, it is an ad hoc measure. The crypt can be transformed into a place of remembrance only after the work has been done to free ourselves from the specters that we planted as our phantoms. Only after renouncing and disarming poisonous secrets – here, what perhaps comes to the fore is the etymological kinship between secret and excrement, which if not egested, is a deadly threat to the organism – is it possible to gain a sense of security.

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It can be said, therefore, that those who reveal dark, poisonous secrets or demand that they be revealed and deciphered; those who wish to tame the ghosts and phantoms that haunt the community, do so in order to restore the community to health, to bury the hitherto unburied, to mourn, and to obtain answers to the

question of who we are today and what our checks and balances are in the human family. The latter seems impossible to do unless one is acting from the position of a reliable contractor. C. Fred Alford, a philosopher who has spent years researching whistleblowers who expose inconvenient secrets of state institutions and corporations, writes how struck he was by the answers of whistleblowers when they were asked about their motivations as they overlapped with those of people who were involved in saving Jews during the war. They tend to speak of having had no other choice: speaking as if they themselves were reaching for the veil of ignorance, they invoked the principle of discretion. “»I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do something«... It is the universal answer, given by almost every whistleblower and almost every rescuer of Jews during the Holocaust” [415]. The crux of the explanations thus given is, in his view, not empathy, not adherence to universal principles, not an ethic of care and commitment, but a kind of seriousness about ourselves and the world.

Going back to Simmel: “The first condition of having to deal with somebody at all is to know with whom one has to deal” [307]. One might say that the kind of seriousness distinguished by Alford is the kind of honesty on which the trust indicated by Simmel is founded, that is, the sense of belonging to a community as a human family and the sense of security that comes with it. The drama of the unmasker, or the “ill-bird” – to use the license granted to us by the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* – is a drama

of trust. It confirms Freud's assumption that no secret is tenable, especially when a "dark" secret pushes us into an affective minefield, a conflict field of mutually exclusive loyalties, which does not mean equivalent, but often conflicted with ad hoc compositions of moral principles.

In his essay, Alford cites Plato's dialogue in which Socrates says that it is better to suffer evil than to do it; better to suffer injustice than to be the cause of it. He goes on to say: "It's preferable for me to be a musician with an out-of-tune lyre or a choir-leader with a cacophonous choir, and it's preferable for almost everyone in the world to find my beliefs misguided and wrong, rather than for just one person – me – to contradict and clash with myself" [Plato 64]. Socrates seems to be saying that a life in self-contempt is the worst possible life. Alford says that this very conviction determines the choices of whistleblowers. But they are not only concerned with fidelity to themselves: here Socrates, making it the highest virtue – according to Alford – is wrong (it is easy to confuse it with *hybris*); the point is that you cannot build a good community if you do not start from yourself.

The revealer of a secret, the exposer, the "ill-bird," the whistleblower, breaks out of the community only in the minds of those who usurp the right to adjudicate infallibly what it is. In fact, to put it in Rancièrian terms, he or she is the "part without a place" (*la part des sans-part*). But their actions (and their condition) mean the abolition of the opposition between the particular and the univer-

sal (they are a particularity identifying themselves with universality), and so they open the way for the passage into the world of the human family. Ostracized by it, they do the local community a favor: it is thanks to people like them that the locality still has a chance to confront the universality, and even to become a legitimate form of universality. He or she is its midwife. Those who expel the “ill-bird” from their community open the door to their own misfortune: they condemn themselves to live in a community that is broken.

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