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The Literary Uncanny

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Freud's famous essay on "The 'Uncanny'"[1] begins with a curious remark. Freud states that psychoanalysts rarely feel impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, and yet they occasionally interest themselves with a particular and to a large extent neglected province of that subject.[2] Such, he claims, is also the case with *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, which contains "a special core of feeling" that is to be distinguished from other feelings of fright. Thus, Freud's essay begins as an aesthetic enterprise. However, it soon becomes clear that it is not the aesthetic side of the feeling that Freud is after, and moreover his is not an aesthetic argument, but a psychoanalytic one, so much so that in the third and final part of the text he says that the results he reached "have satisfied *psycho-analytic* interest in the problem of the uncanny" and adds that "what remains probably calls for an *aesthetic* enquiry."[3] A question therefore imposes itself: Does psychoanalysis have something to say about the aesthetic side of the phenomenon of the uncanny? Freud's essay is not silent with regard to this question. It points to two aesthetic features related to the production of the uncanny that are of great interest for anyone in the field of literary studies with interest in the uncanny. It can be argued that it is precisely from the standpoint of aesthetics and literary studies that the experience of the uncanny in everyday life also becomes clearer and thus Freud's "aesthetic"

1. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, Vol. XVIII (1917-1919), London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1973, 218-256. Here after all references will be to the Standard Edition (SE), followed by the number of the volume and the page number.
2. *Ibid.*, 219.
3. *Ibid.*, 247.

suggestions in this direction are crucial also for the psychoanalyst.

In the present paper we will pose the question of the literary uncanny, what defines it and how does it operate. This text therefore will not be just a commentary on Freud's essay, not in the first place, but rather an attempt to read the uncanny with Freud against Freud in order to delineate what is specific for the appearance of uncanny feeling when reading a literary work of art.[4]

But what is the phenomenon of the uncanny? How does it appear before someone? What is the phenomenological data the scholar could use when investigating the uncanny?

1. Approaching the Phenomenon of the Uncanny

It is doubtful whether one can give an exhaustive list of all the instances of the uncanny. To think one can make such a list can be interpreted as an attempt to block the uncanny feeling by mastering it. The very imposition of a framework that would include all the instances of the uncanny however allows perhaps for at least one more instance not taken into account, the one that disturbs this very framework. Still, we will point to some phenomena that can be uncanny and could serve as a guiding thread when thinking on what makes the uncanny *uncanny*.

(1) The most famous instance of the uncanny is that of the *Doppelgänger*. Indeed, it is easy to imagine how one is confronted with the feeling when seeing one's double. In fact, not only one's *Doppelgänger*, but all the forms of doubling and redoubling (say, the doubling of one's own home; the redoubling or repetition of an experience [usually termed *déjà vu*]; and etc.) can lead to feeling uncanny.

(2) Not less famous is the instance with the blurring of the line dividing *the living* from *the dead*. One thinks of the dead, lying in

4. The paper was presented at the second joint forum, organized by UTCP and Sofia Literary Seminar. It is one of the results from a university lecture course on the uncanny, given at Sofia University and titled: "Das Unheimliche: Literature and Mimesis I.," prepared by Kamelia Spassova, Maria Kalinova and the authors of the present text.

her coffin, suddenly opening her eyes. Or of the person in the chair, supposedly living and watching TV, who turns out to be dead. In these cases we are dealing not with the opposition *dead-alive*, but rather with two oppositions: *dead-undead*, on the one hand, and *alive-nonalive*, on the other, where undead and non-living mediate the relation between dead and alive, revealing it to be undecidable. For reasons we cannot discuss here, this complex relationship is hardly explainable through the Greimas square.

(3) Third instance is given by the couple *technological-natural* at the point of transition from one to the other. The example of Olympia in Hoffmann's "The Sandman" is a case in point, and it was precisely this case that served Jentsch's insistence on the uncanny as based on intellectual uncertainty.[5] It is not Olympia as a robot, or as a doll, neither Olympia as a natural living girl, that is uncanny, but the uncertainty and the transition from one perception of her to another. Behind the couple technological-natural sometimes there is the couple automatic-intentional.

(4) The coupling of *visible and invisible*, or *tangible and intangible* is another instance of the uncertainty. Again, the transition from one state to another can cause the uncanny feeling. The ghosts that appear only to disappear, leaving one insecure and uncertain whether she has seen anything or not, illustrate this well.

(5) Ghosts can be connected also to other instances of what is causing the uncanny, for example the already mentioned problematization of the living/dead boundary, or the *Doppelgänger* (the ghost as a *Doppelgänger* of somebody, or the *Doppelgänger* as a ghost); but they can be a good exemplification of another instance of the uncanny, namely *the lack of distinctness*, *the vagueness*. The uncertainty of the form of the thing one perceives, the undecidability of its contours can be really disturbing.

(6) This is connected to another line whose blurring produces the uncanny, the line between presence and absence. This can be not only

5. Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8/22 (Aug. 25, 1906), S. 195-98; 8/23 (Sept. 1, 1906), S. 203-05. An English translation of that essay by Roy Sellars can be found online, on http://www.art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf, visited on Feb. 4, 2016.

the presence or absence of a living being, but also presence and absence of everyday things, tools, houses, cars, etc. If the second before it was there, and now it is unexplainably gone, one starts doubting one's senses and feeling a strange inquietude.

(7) A seventh instance is given by the relation between the part and the whole. It will be uncanny if (*a*) the part acts on its own, or if (*b*) something one thought to be a whole turns out to be but a part of something different and bigger (as in the case of the stone that turns out to be a monster's tail). The case when an unperceived whole appears (thus in science fiction when a planet appears to be an organic whole) is probably a variation of the second type.

(8) It is noteworthy that what produces the uncanny can be focused sometimes in a particular part of the human being, and that is the face. The deformation of the face or its absence most often than not is uncanny and disturbing. In the example of the Japanese *nopperabou* it is hardly a coincidence that it is precisely the face and its absence that is at stake and that is seen as scary.[6]

(9) One final instance will be *the displacement of the past*. This is what happens to Philip K. Dick's protagonist Ted Barton in *The Cosmic Puppets*, when he returns to his hometown only to find it strangely transformed and unrecognizable and upon asking finds out that his own past has never happened. It could be that this is just a particular type of a more general mechanism that has to do not only with the past but with everything that is known. If this is the case, then it can be claimed that the displacement of the known is a cause for the uncanny.

What we were trying to do is just to give concrete instances of the uncanny. With Freud himself who noted a similar difficulty, we can also say that all these instances of the uncanny describe conditions

6. The human body is, no doubt, a privileged object but it should be mentioned that a deformity in other parts of it, including the sexual organs, would rather evoke disgust and not the uncanny. However, human that turns out to be something different than human (say, a machine, a monster, a demon, an insect) — even if only through some of its parts — will be uncanny. Unfortunately, we cannot discuss here the important question about the relationship between *die Unheimlichkeit,* disgust and anxiety.

that might as well produce a different reaction.[7] They could be seen as comical, just strange, disgusting, intriguing, etc. However, they allow us to make several important observations.

First, in most of these instances the uncanny is caused by an instantaneous realization of what the state of affair is. The question to be posed is whether the uncanny requires duration or it is momentary. All the examples testify to the sudden character of *das Unheimliche*. There is always a *moment* when things turn out to be different than what one thought they were. From aesthetic point of view this suddenness can be seen as a perversion of the Aristotelian recognition, or *anagnorisis*. In Aristotle's case there is recognition where there is a transition from ignorance to knowledge.[8] Kamlia Spassova and Maria Kalinova have called the opposite transition "from knowledge to a lack of knowledge, from recognition to a lack of recognition, from understanding to a lack of understanding" a *negative anagnorisis*.[9] It is indeed a very important notion that is indispensable if one is to grasp some of the most crucial features of the uncanny. In each case, it can be argued, there is a movement of perception where one has to abandon one's knowledge. Whether it will lead to a new perception (say, the realization that the girl was *actually* a doll, an automaton; or that the person supposed to be living is dead), or not (in the case of the vagueness of contours, or the cancelling out of the known past) is an important question that we cannot discuss here in detail. Let it be said just that sometimes it is just the transition to ignorance that produces the uncanny, and sometimes it is the new, positive recognition of what the thing is, or what the state

7. See Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 245-246.

8. Aristotle's *Theory of Poetry and Fine Art,* translated and with critical notes by S. H. Butcher, New York: Dover Publications, 1951, 41 (ch. XI, 1452a:29-1452b:3): "Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the Oedipus." In fact, Aristotle does not argue for the instantaneous character of recognition; it is rather inferable from his examples. It is noteworthy that already for Aristotle the recognition was bound to produce feelings and affects. It produces love or hate in the characters, and pity or fear in the audience.

9. Kamelia Spassova and Maria Kalinova, "Negative Anagnorisis: Notes on the Uncanny and the Metamorphosis in Kafka's The Metamorphosis," published in this volume, 78.

of affair is (the person being undead; the whole turning out to be a part of something different, etc.). In each case, however, there is a negativity involved, and it is this negativity, this *negative anagnorisis* that tears you away from the domain of certainty, from the realm of the known.

One more thing should be remarked regarding the sudden character of the *negative anagnorisis* in the case of the uncanny. The slow realization of the state of affaires kills the sense of the uncanny. If one has too much time in advance to think over what cancels one's knowledge, if one has the luxury of slowly investigating, if one has enough time to prepare, most probably there will be no uncanny feeling. Even if there were hints, even if there were a slow investigation, it seems that the *negative anagnorisis* must be instantaneous, so that the person is caught off guard. The sudden occurrence however, is not all there is regarding the specific temporality of the uncanny. For if there are too many events, too many sudden changes, in other words, if there is no time for the sudden negative recognition to *resonate* or *reverberate*, again most likely there will be no uncanny. This supplementary aspect of the negative, perverse recognition, is the *processuality of the uncanny*, the time of the immanent development of the uncanny feeling. Sudden occurrence and resonance. The resonance also forms part of the recognition. It is like the tail of a comet, the realization of the effects and the effectivity of the *negative anagnorisis*. It is in the time of the resonance that the subject realizes fully the extent to which he or she no longer has control over the situation, the extent to which he or she *has no longer mastery*.

2. Freud's Hints and What Lurks Behind

Anagnorisis seems to be taking us back to the understanding of the uncanny as having to do with what Jentsch called intellectual uncertainty. Freud criticized this view. Our observations also should have made it clear that *das Unheimliche* is never just about intellectual uncertainty. Still, the intellectual uncertainty is important because through it shines the real question of *mastery*. Mastery in the sense both of control and power. The intellectual uncertainty is indicating the fact that we lose our minimal mastery: the mastery over the state of

affairs, in which we know what the case is and what is going on. With *das Unheimliche* — even if for a moment — we lose this knowledge. We will return to this.

The fact that *das Unheimliche* has to do with the question of mastery is inferable from Freud's own text precisely in the point of his criticism against Jentsch. To put it simply, Freud substitutes *the castration complex* and *the omnipotence of thoughts* for the intellectual uncertainty. He claims that even after we "detect the sober truth" and overcome the uncertainty, "this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree."[10] And then he turns to the problem of castration anxiety: "We shall venture, therefore, to refer the uncanny effect of the Sand-man to the anxiety belonging to the castration complex of childhood."[11] Fear of castration is a motive force of repression and when the repressed returns it creates an uncanny effect. According to Freud, one of the ways to overcome the castration anxiety is to create a *double*, the problem being that the overcoming the double starts functioning as a threat. "This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling of multiplication of a genital symbol. [...] But when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death."[12] When speaking of the *double* Freud refers to Otto Rank and invokes the archaic practices of doubling pointed by Rank. Freud however further develops his theory on the uncanny in this direction by connecting it to the remnants of the archaic mythical thinking. He says that "everything which strikes us as 'uncanny' fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression."[13] It is from this perspective that the omnipotence of thoughts as an heir of the archaic magical beliefs is given a crucial role in the creation of uncanniness.

10. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 230.

11. *Ibid.*, 233.

12. *Ibid.*, 235.

13. *Ibid.*, 240-241.

Freud sends the reader back to the third chapter of *Totem and Taboo*, where — already in 1913 — he has written: "We appear to attribute an 'uncanny' quality to impressions that seek to confirm the omnipotence of thoughts and the animistic mode of thinking in general, after we have reached a stage at which, in our *judgment*, we have abandoned such beliefs."[14] Both the doubling and the omnipotence of thoughts are not only part of the individual development but "modes of thinking belonging to the prehistory [...] of the race" that were not repressed but *surmounted*.[15] Thus we have two main reasons for the appearance of the uncanny: the return of the repressed (traced back to the castration complex) and the emergence of the surmounted (traced back to archaic thinking). Freud summarizes: "animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny."[16]

The rationalistic surmounting of the archaic idea of the omnipotence of thoughts is a step in view of exerting a real — and not magical — control over reality. The return not of the repressed but of the surmounted subverts the belief in the forces of rationalism. It is not just going back to a previous stage, for the stage has been already surmounted. It is rather a recognition that neither the rationalistic, nor the magical account of reality, holds. A negative anagnorisis. A realization that one no longer has a grip on the situation.

With the castration complex it seems even more obvious how it is related to the problem of mastery, but it should be noted that a few years after the essay on *das Unheimliche* Freud revised his conception of anxiety in a significant manner that affects directly the relation between castration and uncanniness. In 1919 Freud still thought that the affect is transformed into anxiety because of its repression, and therefore that repression is the cause of desire. In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," written in 1926, he abandons this view, claiming that the origin of anxiety must be searched further back and that it is related

14. Freud, "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts" (1913), SE, vol. XIII, 86.

15. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 245.

16. *Ibid*., 243.

to primeval traumatic experiences. "Anxiety is not newly created in repression; it is reproduced as an affective state in accordance with an already existing mnemic image. If we go further and enquire into the origin of that anxiety — and of affects in general — we shall be leaving the realm of pure psychology and entering the borderland of physiology. Affective states have become incorporated in the mind as precipitates of primaeval traumatic experiences, and when a similar situation occurs they are revived like mnemic symbols."[17] If this is the case and the repression is not what causes the anxiety, then repression itself should not be referred back only to castration. And Freud asks: "is it absolutely certain that fear of castration is the only motive force of repression?"[18] In this new account, anxiety is "a reaction to a situation of danger"[19] connected to the at first purely physiological needs of the newborn. The initial danger is not castration but one's own *helplessness*. Freud writes: "anxiety is seen to be a product of the infant's mental helplessness which is a natural counterpart of its biological helplessness."[20] On a later stage the danger will be related to the possible loss of the object, and only then to the castration. Freud enumerates at least four stages: "Thus the danger of psychical helplessness is appropriate to the period of life when [the] ego is immature; the danger of loss of object, to early childhood when he is still dependant on others; the danger of castration, to the phallic phase; and the fear of his super-ego, to the latency period."[21] If this is the case, then on this side of the castration complex there is helplessness that is reproduced in each of the following stages. And helplessness means lack of control, powerlessness. It means no mastery.

Behind the castration complex and the surmounted archaic thinking is the no-mastery, the helplessness of man.

In fact, already in the essay on *das Unheimliche* when speaking of repetition Freud on two occasions stresses helplessness and its relation to uncanniness. He says that repetition does "arouse an uncanny feeling,

17. Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926), SE, vol. XX, 1959, 93.

18. *Ibid.*, 123.

19. *Ibid.*, 128.

20. *Ibid.*, 138.

21. *Ibid.*, 142.

which, furthermore, recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states" and adds that in the case of "unintended recurrence of the same situation" the result will be "the same feeling of helplessness and of uncanniness."[22] Repetition and the compulsion to repeat, of course, are related to the death drive, which Freud never names as such in the essay, but what is more important for the present paper is that the death drive itself,[23] from the perspective of the anxiety it arouses, is related to helplessness and it is this relation that is at the bottom of the uncanny feeling.

Later in the essay, when commenting the link between man's attitude towards death and the uncanny, he writes that "no human being really grasps it [mortality]"[24] and stresses "the insufficiency of our scientific knowledge" about death. What is translated in English as "insufficiency" however in the German original is *Unsicherheit*, uncertainty, the same word Jentch uses when speaking of intellectual uncertainty (*intellektuelle Unsicherheit*). Freud seems to be saying as much: "*die Unsicherheit unserer wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis*," the uncertainty of our scientific knowledge. It is our inability to grasp what death is, our intellectual helplessness in the face of death, that leads to the feeling of the uncanny. If we repeat now Freud's summary of the causes of the uncanny, it will become clear that what is at stake in all those instances is the lack of mastery: "animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny."[25]

What has become clear however is that from the perspective of the question of helplessness the dividing line between Jentch's intellectual uncertainty, on the one hand, and Freud's castration complex and omnipotence of thoughts, on the other, does not seem to be as secure and clear as it seems to be for Freud.

Before proceeding further in this direction, we must remark the

22. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 237.

23. See *ibid.,* 238.

24. *Ibid.*, 242.

25. *Ibid.*, 243.

continual displacement introduced by the theme of helplessness. Sarah Kofman in one of the most revealing readings of Freud's essay and Hoffmann's "The Sandman" has noted how Freud "by stressing the castration complex as a final signified, occults the importance of the hypothesis of the death drive, which he is meanwhile on the train of underlying, for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* dates from the same year."[26] As we noted, the death drive is mentioned rather in passing and is not named as such in "Das Unheimliche." However, one should not only move from the castration complex and the omnipotence of thoughts, subjected to the pleasure principle, in direction of the death drive, of which Freud says that it is "powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle,"[27] but also search for what beyond the death drive can be seen as the correlate to the question of helplessness. As Jacques Derrida has shown, in the very text of the *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud names the only thing that escapes the pleasure principle *Bemächtigungstrieb*, or power drive.[28] Derrida writes, "the motif of power is more originary and more general than the PP [the pleasure principle], is independent of it, is its beyond. But it is not to be confused with the death drive or the repetition compulsion, it gives us with what to describe them, and in respect to them, as well as to a "mastery" of the PP, it plays the role of transcendental predicate. Beyond the pleasure principle — power [*le pouvoir*]."[29] This "drive for mastery [*pulsion de maîtrise*]"[30] we would claim, is the correlate of helplessness. The drive whose work is related most directly to the uncanny is the *drive for mastery*.

But how is all this related to literature?

26. Sarah Kofman, "Le double e(s)t le diable," *Quatre romans analytiques*, Paris: Galilée, 1973, 174, n31.

27. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 242.

28. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE, vol. XVIII, 1962, 3-65; Jacques Derrida, « Spéculer — sur Freud », *La carte postale*, Paris: Flammarion, 1980, esp. 430-432.

29. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987, 405; Derrida, « Spéculer — sur Freud », *ibid.,* 432.

30. Derrida, « Spéculer — sur Freud », 430.

3. The Uncanny in Literature

It is curious to note how after having enumerated all the factors that produce the uncanny (animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex) Freud does not come to the end of the paper but has to go on, disclaiming what he has just said and arguing that "not everything that recalls repressed desires and surmounted modes of thinking belonging to the prehistory of the individual and of the race — is on that account uncanny."[31] And he gives counter-examples with fairy tales and works of art where one can see the same instances of the uncanny only, this time, without any uncanniness. He distinguishes between "the uncanny we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about,"[32] stressing the fact that in the second case the phantasy, producing the uncanny, "is not submitted to reality-testing."[33] This is a rather important remark but Freud doesn't seem to be willing to take it into account in his discussion of "The Sandman." In the only more developed discussion of a literary work that has to do with the uncanny, he has ignored what is definitive for the very experience of the uncanny in literature. Is not this one of the reasons his criticism of Jentsch's intellectual uncertainty seems to be valid?

The notion of "intellectual uncertainty," however, cannot be dismissed in this context. It allows us in the case of the literary uncanny to take into account both the drive for mastery and the reality-testing. The way the narrative machine operates[34] — i.e. by not

31. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 245. In this quote it is obvious how there are only two important factors for Freud — castration complex and primitive beliefs — that are to be taken into account when explaining the uncanny. Here he has dismissed without any stipulation both the attitude toward death and the repetition. The same is confirmed several pages later: "Our conclusion could then be stated thus: an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by one impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed." (*Ibid.*, 249)

32. *Ibid.*, 247.

33. *Ibid.*, 249.

34. Let us say, simplifying, that narrativity is a machine to organize the events and the relationship between the events. It should be remarked also, that, of course, not all

exposing the reader directly, materially to the events of the story, but through a representation, for the most part guided by the narrator — means precisely that cognition plays the foremost role in shaping the experience of the fictional world and its effects, including the uncanny. Knowledge in this case is the only way to exercise control over the events presented by the literary form, since it resolves their radical instability, and thus to compensate the impossibility for reality-testing. Thus, on the one hand, there is the interest what will happen (or has happened), and on the other, there is the fear that we will not and cannot find what happens. Knowing what happens, knowing that it happens (has happened, will happen), knowing how it happens: since these are the only ways, in which the reader confronts the events of the narrative, knowledge becomes the only brand of mastery, afforded to him or her. To know what goes on therefore proves to be a specific kind of control and power. Consequently, "intellectual certainty" is one of the major trajectories in the processing of the text in reading. If we can speak of a peculiarly literary uncanny, we must take into account the disruptions of this certainty, the ways in which the reader loses the grasp over *the happening itself*[35] of the events presented, the processes that provide the conditions for failing to resolve them into stable facts and meanings.

Yet what is it, on the level of the literary text, that *supports* the knowledge, the intellectual certainty? The reader understands the words, understands the sentences. What is it in the text that can disturb the reader's intellectual certainty and cause an uncanny experience?

Freud himself gives two indications, that are not psychoanalytical (at least not only, or not predominantly psychoanalytical) but pertain to the domain of literary criticism.

(1) The first indication is given in the discussion of the question why usually the fairy tales do not evoke uncanniness. He writes:

> The creative writer can also choose a setting [*Der Dichter kann*

literature, not even all fictional literature, is narrative. Unfortunately, here we cannot discuss this problem.

35. This, of course is a reference to Lyotard's take on the sublime. We'll discuss the relationship between the literary uncanny and the sublime in some detail further below.

> *sich auch eine Welt erschaffen haben*] which though less imaginary than the world of fairy tales, does yet differ from the real world by admitting superior spiritual beings such as daemonic spirits or ghosts of the dead. So long as they remain within the *setting of poetic reality* [*die Voraussetzungen dieser poetischen Realität*], such figures lose any uncanniness which they might posses.[36]

The English translation uses twice a word that is missing from the German, namely *setting*. It renders two different German words: first, *Welt*, or world, and then, *Voraussetzung*, which can be translated as premise. The digression in the translation is here rather helpful and we will use the term *setting* in order to refer to what Freud points at, namely the way in which the work constructs its fictional world. *It is through the setting that the fictional world is constructed*. The literary world is not given in any direct manner and it is the setting that defines what this world will be. The setting of a fairy tale is different than that of a historical novel, both differ from the setting of a science fiction novel, etc.

(2) Freud's second indication again does not provide a suitable term but is just as important as the first one. He asks again why is it that an element (his example being a severed hand in a fairy tale by Hauff and a story told by Herodotus) in one work is uncanny and in another is not.

> The answer is easy. In the Herodotus story our thoughts are concentrated much more on the superior cunning of the master-thief than on the feelings of the princess. The princess may very well have had an uncanny feeling, indeed she very probably fell into a swoon; but *we* have no such sensations, for *we put ourselves in the thief's place, not in hers* [*aber wir verspüren nichts Unheimliches, denn wir versetzen uns nicht in sie, sondern in den anderen*].[37]

The answer seems to Freud easy, but it is noteworthy that it is

36. Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *ibid.,* 250. The italics are ours.

37. *Ibid.*, 252. The italics in the final sentence are ours.

different than the setting. Freud here tells us something different. Whether there will be an uncanny feeling or not depends not only on the setting but also on the particular viewpoint. Even if for some of the characters the events could have been uncanny, if you are looking from a different perspective, then they are not necessarily uncanny for you. If the story of a supposedly living person that suddenly turns out to have been dead is told not from the viewpoint of the friend that finds him and experiences *negative anagnorisis*, but from the point of view of the dead himself, the story could be sad and tragic, but it will hardly be uncanny. Let us call this second aspect that can bring uncanniness *viewpoint*.

On the ground of Freud's two indications it can be said that from aesthetic perspective the experience of *das Unheimliche* depends on a double condition, related to: 1. the *setting*; and 2. the *viewpoint*.

Freud gives these two indications and does not proceed further, for, as he has remarked, "what remains probably calls for an *aesthetic* enquiry."[38] What is the direction for the development of such an "aesthetic enquiry"? In the remaining part of the paper we will outline it.

A. Frame management I. The Setting

The key textual level that serves as a basis for the comforting knowledge of narrative events is the *setting*. The setting comprises of textual indices that call forth in the mind of the reader a *frame* that guides, that finally settles the radical undecidabilty of the events. The setting provides the reader with source for inferences as what frame is to be applied to the unfolding events, thus granting them with an underlying logic and coherence. Since the setting itself is concrete and even unique network of textual givens, it needs the support of the frame to really become a setting, to start setting up and organize the status and relationship between narrative events. The process can be explained in a simplified way in the following manner: textual elements indicate to the reader what frame to apply, he or she then follows up

38. *Ibid.*, 247.

on this indication and supplies the frame, which turns these elements into a set of determinations for the events. Ultimately the frame is what fixes the instability of narrative relationships, turning them into certain knowledge, i.e. it is the central means of control over the events. One of Freud's examples — the fairy tale — gives a telling clue about the relationship between setting and frame: the setting is *the world of the fairy tale, where…*, while the frame is *that it is a fairy-tale* — the *knowledge* that we are dealing with a fairy tale. We should note, however, that, even though it partakes in the non-said of the work, the setting itself is textual in character, while the frame has a peculiar virtuality and it is set in an in-between space: (*a*) between text and context, and (*b*) between text and reader.[39] It is formed predominantly by literary convention and literary competence, i.e. it is a convergence of social practices and intertextual relations. Being itself familiar, the frame ensures that however odd and unstable, the events of a story become recognizable, and thus manageable by the reader.

As Freud's example of the fairy tale clearly shows, genre expectations are some of the most simple and effective forms of a frame projecting its power over the narrative events of a story. A crime novel may set up its frame by supplying indices like murder, investigator, etc., and through the frame the reader resolves the events by dominating them in terms of disclosure of motives, reasons and interests. Of course, the same text may call for the application of different frames in succession or simultaneously, as in the novels by Dostoyevsky, where often the crime setting is supplanted by an expansion of indices that reframe them in a more psychological direction.

There are two ways in which the application of the frame may fail, and only one of them produces the uncanny. First of all the reader may not follow up on the textual indices and thus may not supply an appropriate frame. This depends on many factors — his literary competence, the level of attention while reading, etc. The result in this case is more akin to dissatisfaction — the reader may continue reading a *Crime and Punishment* as a pure crime novel, but most of the events

39. This suggests that the setting can be studied in a formal manner as a type of textual criticism (as it was done in narratology or some theories of fictionality), and the frame cannot.

in the narrative will then be rendered meaningless and superfluous. This, however, will not invalidate the mastery afforded by the applied frame over the events themselves — the reader may claim, perfectly confident in his or her knowledge, that *Crime and Punishment* is not a good crime novel. An extreme case would be the one, where the reader fails to provide any frame for the text from the onset — this will simply make the events themselves unavailable for the reader, and the whole reading experience will devolve into a semiotic "noise," but will nevertheless not undermine the comfort in the knowledge of the type "This is nonsense!" or "This is not literature!"[40] At best this kind of failure in working with the frame may produce dissatisfaction, but not uncanniness, since here the familiar itself is not in question.

In order for some piece of literature to produce an uncanny experience in the reader, the frame must still hold to a degree. The peculiarity of the uncanny here, as mentioned above, has to do with the disruption of certainty rather than its reinforcement, which is actually what happens with the predominance of the frame over and against the textual indices. The uncanny needs to proceed through a breakdown of the familiar and thus the frame needs to have lost control over its functioning. This means that the literary uncanny is dependent on the frame's *failure to fit* the indices that have made it available. That can happen when the textual components responsible for establishing the setting and the viewpoint structure for the determination of the events point to incompatible frames that are still fully applicable, yet mutually disrupt and block each other's effectiveness. Thus the underlying conditions for the literary uncanny involve a complex relation: an essential ambiguity, instability of the textual indices themselves, and lack of fit in two directions: between relevant frames and between each frame and the indices (since each one only partially validates the potential, presented by the indices). The situation is different than the process of reframing we presented through the example of Dostoyevsky,

40. Of course, it is possible that the reader provides a framework based only on his everyday experience. One can think of an ideal reader, who has no idea whatsoever — if that is possible — what is specific for literary and fictional texts; such a reader will read everything as if it were pretending to be true, and will most probably judge all texts in terms of the 'true/ lie' dichotomic model.

since there one frame overrides the initial one, reorganizing the status of the narrative events in a definite way. If a literary uncanny is possible, it may probably be considered as coming about through the loss of power of the frame over the events, letting them play out their radical instability in raw form. Faced with incompatible knowledge about the status of the event due to the relevant frames inability to establish full sway over them, the reader is induced into a radical uncertainty about them.

What is decisive here is this question of incompatibility as it refers to the frames. It should be noted that the frames themselves may not necessarily be incompatible in any essential way, they only have to invalidate each other in their power to make possible a decision about/for the event *on the occasion* of certain configuration of literary conventions and the reader's own literary competence. The incompatibility thus experienced as uncanny may itself give rise to a formation of a new frame that can account for the radical uncertainties of the narrative events. A good case in point may be the absurdist drama in the 20th century that initially evoked a significant hesitation as to whether it was meant to be comedic or existential (this hesitation itself being viewed as deeply disturbing) and soon enough this uncertainty itself became the point of clarity as to the status of the absurdist drama event — it *is* both light and heavy, both laughable and deplorable. While repetition may produce the uncanny, once it is produced, the uncanny may as well become non-repeatable. Since the uncanny experience is not dependant only upon the text, it is neither necessary, nor universally available. And it is easy to imagine how what seemed uncanny during the first reading of a work, may not be so in a second or third reading. Moreover, there are specific frames of interpretation that are most often used to do away with the uncanny, and sometimes they are indicated by the works themselves. To think that everything that led to the uncanny experience was due to madness, to a trick, to a language experiment, to a joke, etc., is a way to explain the uncanny and cancel its effects.

B. Frame management II. The Viewpoint

Another specific aspect of the literary uncanny is its peculiar duration. While it certainly is experienced as sudden, the fact that it involves processing the text through the frame support means it actually builds up, reaches a threshold and than resonates in a non-linear fashion — it engulfs not only what is currently presented, but destabilizes the events on both the retention and protention axis: it subverts the knowledge of what has already happened, as well as the anticipation of what may still come about. This is ensured by the specificity of the viewpoint. In fact, the temporality of what we call *resonance of the uncanny* is *at least* triple and this suggests that the viewpoint is also more complex. First, there is the temporality of the character, inscribed in, but not always reducible to, the time of the events on the level of the story. Second, there is the temporality of the narrative, related to the ways the events are told and the character is represented. Finally, there is the temporality of the reader facing the text and its fictional world. Yet, we should be careful not to think that there are three independent temporalities. There is one temporality and it is — at least — triple. Although we can disentangle them in an abstract way for theoretical and other perverse reasons, their real disentanglement would mean nothing less than the end of reading. The uncanny experience of the reader is dependent on the resonance simultaneously (1) in the reader's experience of time, (2) in the way the story makes it last, and finally, (3) in the accessibility to the characters experience and its modalizations.

What does this tell us about the viewpoint? Already in Freud's example it was obvious that the viewpoint is at least double. The reader puts herself or himself in the position of one of the characters and not in that of another; say we put ourselves in the thief's place and not in that of the princess. Therefore, there is at least one viewpoint identifiable or *repérable* in the work. It is most easily represented by the position of some of the characters. And there is at least one exterior viewpoint, that of the reader. Usually, the two do not function separately.

For that reason, when we speak of the uncanny, the viewpoint should not be conceived as a mere textual device. The viewpoint here is not

reducible to the "focus of narration" or "focalisation,"[41] even though it is unthinkable without them. What Freud has already sensed as a specific stress of the narrative on the figure of the theft, rather than on that of the princess, is nothing other than Genette's focalization, the mode in which the events are represented from the standpoint of this or that character (notwithstanding the problem whether the focalized character is also a narrator or not). The focalization is the formally organized perspective within the text. The reader's viewpoint, however, does not necessarily coincide with that of the focalized character. Moreover, there are other possible positions for the reader provided by the text, and the reader can use them as well. Wolfgang Iser has called the specific viewpoint of the reader a *wandering viewpoint*.[42] In literature the object is not given as it is in perception; the reader "has to build up his object for himself"[43] and this happens by the way the reader wanders between different perspectives and different positions and connects them. "The switch of viewpoints brings about a spotlighting of textual perspectives, and these in turn become reciprocally influenced backgrounds which endow each new foreground with a specific shape and form. As the viewpoint changes again, this foreground merges into the background, which it had modified and which is now to exert its influence on yet another new foreground. Every articulate reading moment entails a switch of perspective, and this constitutes an inseparable combination of differentiated perspectives, foreshortened memories, present modifications, and future expectations. Thus, in the time-flow of the reading process, past and future continually converge in the present moment, and the synthetizing operations of the wandering viewpoint enable the text to pass through the reader's mind as an ever-expanding network of connections."[44] The wandering viewpoint is another way to search for a pertinent framework in order to hold the fictional elements under the control of one's own understanding.

Therefore one has to account for the difference between focalization

41. See Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris: Seuil, 1972, 203-224.

42. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

43. *Ibid.*, 109.

44. *Ibid.*, 116.

and the wandering viewpoint, but at the same time one has to take them both in consideration. In the case of *das Unheimliche*, however, neither the focalizations in the text, nor the wandering viewpoint allow for the maintenance of the frame. Even the wandering viewpoint of the reader turns out to be limited in a space that puts in question all the frames at hand. In other words, the uncanny, in order to be at all, should be, even if just for a moment, inescapable. Inescapable in the sense of non-masterable, non-controlable by the subject, non-subjectable to the power drive. The wandering viewpoint would be a means to master the uncanny related to a particular focalization. But there are cases where this proves to be, even if just for a moment, impossible. The duration of the resonance of this uncanny moment depends on the triple temporality described above. The reader is capable of re-shifting and re-sifting the givens of the text only to a certain extent, and if the focalizations, the setting and the discursive organization of the story maintain the mutual invalidation of frames that leads to frame blockage, then most probably the resonance will endure longer.

It should be remarked that the case of literature is exemplary, because unlike every-day experience or the other arts, here the problem of the viewpoint and the possibility of more than one viewpoint — but perhaps literature is what reveals the fact that the viewpoint is always more than one — cannot be overlooked. It cannot be overlooked neither on the level of the semiotic (where we have relation between signs), nor on that of the pragmatic (where the relationship is between sender, sign, and receiver), nor on that of the semantic (where the relationship is that between signs and world, with all the problematic of reference in fiction, fictional worlds, etc.).

C. The Uncanny, the Comic, the Sublime

The operations of the frames and the fluctuations of the viewpoints account for the problems Freud faces when discussing the uncanny in literature. Many components of the standard repertoire of the uncanny (repetition, doubles, automatism of various kinds, etc.), however, as we already noted with Freud, in literary works do not produce the described anxiety, but often are rather comic, and sometimes even

sublime. His explanation — that this unreliability of the literary uncanny is due to the "suspension of disbelief" of fiction, while in order for the uncanny to take effect, it must be a fully actual "return of the repressed" — is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First of all the notion of fiction itself puts in question the fully stable difference between real and unreal,[45] and, more importantly, literature itself performs its own type of "repression" — that of the mastery over the instability of the events presented through the frame.[46] The suspension of the functioning of this controlling mechanism results in an effect of sudden yet durable effect of "defamiliarization" of the so far recognizable events.

That is why the comic and the sublime may both be seen as application of frames that strive directly to control the unruly uncanny. The implication of the comic with power and control has been noted already by Bergson, who explicitly connects laughter with social sanction.[47] The comic often comes very close thematically to the uncanny (as described by Freud) precisely because it exerts control over the uncanny in literature. The same can be said of the sublime, at least in its predominant version at turn of the 18th century. Speaking

45. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

46. Of course, in this case the mechanism will be different than that of the repression. In literature, in what today is called literature, there is a radical putting in question of every existing frame, a negativity irreducible to the opposition positivity-negativity, which is still a product of a specific frame. Different modalities of this negativity were described by Bataille, Blanchot, Adorno, Derrida, Iser, Lacoue-Labarthe.

47. See especially the third chapter of Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. by Cl. Brereton and Fr. Rothwell, accessible at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm. Bergson writes that "laughter has a social meaning and import, that the comic expresses, above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society. [...] Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream. [...] Society, properly so-called, proceeds in exactly the same way. Each member must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment; in short, he must avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar character as a philosopher in his ivory tower. Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social 'ragging.'"

of the fears, tied to animism, Freud claims that they are ultimately "surmounted" by modern men. Such a "surmounting" is also involved in the Kantian sublime. It is not by accident that Kant insists that experience of the sublime, unlike that of the beautiful, is available only to someone with a sufficient degree of culture.[48] The operation involved in the sublime aesthetical experience may even seem as the ultimate reversal of the conditions that produce the literary uncanny. While the later is defined by a loss of mastery, the sublime effects a regaining of this mastery[49] — the characteristic "delight" in the sublime presentation stems from the removal from its immediacy, from *recognition* of safety. The traditional notions that define the sublime aesthetics have always included the reassertion of power (of Reason over both Nature and Imagination, etc.) rather than its loss. Just like the comic, the sublime may be seen as targeting the uncanny as something to be managed through recognition, as a tension that may be resolved as an aesthetical gain. Of course, the sublime itself has complex modes of functioning, including the kind of anesthetical subversion of this triumphant resolution as described with reference to Lyotard's work by Hoshino Futoshi.[50] The material suspension it effects may not be experienced necessarily as lack of certainty and recognizably, but it also fails to reestablish control.

D. Recapitulation

We started this paper with different instances of the uncanny and then we reconstructed some of the basic arguments in Freud's essay, claiming that the ultimate resource of the uncanny is the helplessness

48. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J. H. Bernard, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, §29, 130: "In fact, without development of moral Ideas, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime, presents to the uneducated man merely as terrible."

49. Cf. "And so also the irresistibility of its [nature's] might, while making us recognize our own physical impotence, considered as beings of nature, discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of, and a *superiority over*, nature" (Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, § 28, 125). The italics are ours.

50. See Futoshi Hoshino, "The Sublime and Capitalism in Jean-François Lyotard," in the present volume.

that blocks the work of the power drive, the drive for mastery. From this perspective we put in question the distinction between Jentsch's and Freud's answers to the question what causes the uncanniness, arguing that both the intellectual uncertainty and the castration complex with the residues of archaic thinking lead back to the power drive. For indeed, knowledge — the knowledge what is the state of affairs, what is the case — is a specific kind of control and power. It is especially important in literature, where control and mastery can be exerted only by way of understanding and knowing, in other words, by way of intellectual certainty.

Then we tried to use Freud's indications and to see where an "aesthetic enquiry" about the uncanny in literature would lead us. We pointed how the experience of the uncanny in literature depends on *the setting* and *the viewpoint*. Both setting and viewpoint are related to a notion that Freud does not employ, the notion of the *frame*. The frame is what organizes our experience and helps us keep it in control. It exists only in-between. On the one hand it is between the work and its context; on the other, it is between the work and the reader. The emergence of the uncanny in literature (but probably not only) is due to a frame blockage, produced through a mutual invalidation of pertinent frames connected to the frame's specific failure to fit. In this case, (*1*) the reader does not dispose with (*a*) useful setting and (*b*) a valid viewpoint such that they would provide him with a (c) relevant frame. (*2*) This leads to a condition of helplessness, caused by the inability of the reader to control and explain away what troubles him. (*3*) This creates a vague sense of threat.[51]

In this way we outlined the direction in which an "aesthetic enquiry" on the literary uncanny can be developed. This path, albeit indicated by Freud, has not been developed by him and is not psychoanalytic per se. Thus, there appears to be a literary uncanny that needs to be treated in a manner parallel to and different from the two most prominent

51. Of course, it can be said that since in literature we don't have direct contact to what is represented, the affect of anxiety and the uncanny feeling cannot but have a weak effect on us. The weak affectivity of literature, however, is not so obvious and certain. We will not discuss the problem here for it will take us back from the aesthetic to the psychoanalytic enquiry.

treatments of *das Unheimliche* in the first part of the 20th century, namely those of Freud and Heidegger. What is the field that will have the literary uncanny as its object? It is neither psychoanalysis, nor ontology. In this enterprise we are closer to Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, or Sarah Kofman, on the one hand, and to Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology, on the other. Is it reducible to the field of literary criticism for that matter? The literary uncanny probably still calls for a deconstruction of some institutional boundaries.