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'We Ourselves Speak a Language that is Foreign': One Hundred Years of Freud's Uncanny Edited by Nicholas Royle

Articles

De-posing the Uncanny

Dominik Zechner

Even though Freud's essay on the 'uncanny' draws on many literary and philosophical sources, the reference receiving the most critical attention has been E. T. A. Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman' (1816). The choice of this literary influence is not autonomous on Freud's part, however—for Freud's intervention is motivated by a systematic refutation of Ernst Jentsch, at the time author of the only extensive study on matters uncanny and whose analysis Freud seeks to repudiate in its entirety. It is therefore quite remarkable that Freud takes from his adversary one of his main cues: both Freud and Jentsch agree that Hoffmann's text is *unheimlich*, they merely differ in how the uncanny is to be defined. In what follows, I shall fundamentally question this shared assumption and argue that 'The Sandman' is, in fact, not a story 'about' the uncanny, nor is it an 'uncanny' story.

A brief scan of Hoffmann's text suffices to observe that the term 'unheimlich' is indeed used to qualify some of the occurrences rendered: it is deployed by Nathanael in the initial letter to his friend Lothar; then picked up by his fiancée Clara in her response; lastly, the term surfaces in the context of Nathanael's encounter with Olympia, the cyborg with which he would calamitously fall in love. Apart from these isolated moments, however, 'uncanny' seems to be of little importance. As a matter of fact, moods and affective states rendered in the narrative usually appear as affective clusters, which is to say, feelings are often coupled and concatenated, making it almost impossible to identify one single mood or state of mind as representative of Nathanael's experience. Hence, the conjunction 'and' is Hoffmann's go-to rhetorical key whenever a subjective mood is at stake. Instead of being simply anxiety-ridden, for instance, Nathanael

writes about his first encounter with the sandman that his heart was pounding out of 'anxiety *and* expectation'; another moment has the sandman elicit 'disgust *and* revulsion'; other passages speak of 'anxiety *and* horror', 'anxiety *and* unrest', 'longing *and* yearning', 'pain *and* exaltation', etc.[1] These passages not only testify to the prominent place of anxiety ('Angst') in Nathanael's affective economy, but also, and more importantly, to the diversity of moods elicited by the narrated circumstance: affective states usually occur as hybrids and composites, conjoined by an *and* whose repeated use is extremely conspicuous. One may therefore assume that the story's affective economy is not reducible to a single feeling, much less to the seldom-appearing 'uncanny'. Yet, the repeated coupling of affective states may itself already indicate an 'uncanny effect', a provoked ambivalence, such that the uncanny would appear less as a singular feeling than as the principle of affective entangling and concatenation (cf. U1: 234–36).

As we consider the motley blend of affective states proffered in Hoffmann's narrative, it is nevertheless the case that one signifier stands out. Pointing to something more fundamental than the affective condition or subjective mood elicited by an object or situation encountered, this marker of disruption is quite distinct from the uncanny—yet it determines Hoffmann's narrative from the get-go. In his opening letter, Nathanael first apologizes for not having written in such a long time before proceeding to explain the reason for the present envoi, laying bare the cause of his torn disposition. Before retelling his revived childhood trauma of encountering the sandman and losing his father, he sets the stage by virtue of the following formulation: 'Etwas *Entsetzliches* ist in mein Leben getreten.'[2] One could translate this sentence as 'something horrible entered my life', but that would miss the point. Nearly impossible to render in English, the adjective *entsetzlich* is often translated as 'horrible' or 'terrible', thereby relinquishing the word's vast semantic complexity. One is reminded of Freud's linguistic assertions about the uncanny, for here, too, 'we get an impression that many languages are without a word for this particular shade of what is frightening' (U1: 221). Unlike its usual translations, the term *entsetzlich* semantically partakes in the lexicon and logic of positing or *Setzung*—more than that, by dint of the prefix *ent-*, which indicates a removal or an inversion, it upsets this very logic, signalling a crisis of positionality. Pointing toward an occurrence of

de-positing or *de-posing*, it literally un-settles the impacted subject, corroding its status as posited within the realm of existing beings. *Ent-setz-lich* thus indicates an occurrence that undoes what is posited; it carries the ontological, better yet: the ana-ontological weight of corroding that which *is* (to the extent that it is posited) and thus taps into a sphere outside the logic of occupied and occupiable positions, a sphere of a-position whence the gesture of positing becomes possible and plausible in the first place. It is therefore pivotal to understand de-posing not simply as the opposite of positing, as any structure of opposition would remain dependent on the logic of positing which permits negation only *within* its *set* precinct.[3]

More so than any other signifier, the semantics of *entsetzlich* mark the recurring references to the figure of the sandman in Hoffmann's story. Versions of the term, either as noun, substantivized adjective, adjective, adverb or verb—*Entsetzen*, *Entsetzliches*, *entsetzlich*, *entsetzt*—appear a total of 26 times in the course of the narrative, putting it in place as the distinguishing marker of (Nathanael's encountering) the sandman. Hence, the question arises as to why Freud's reading flat-out avoids this lexicon, positing Hoffmann's story as reducible to the uncanny. In other words, what is the relationship between *unheimlich* and *entsetzlich*—and why is it that psychoanalysis appears to not want to touch the latter? To be sure, one can find traces of the repressed signifier in Freud's text. For instance, when recounting Nathanael's doppelganger encounter in Italy, as the optician Giuseppe Coppola offers the student glasses under the triggering slogan 'fine eyes', Freud writes: 'The student's *terror* [*Entsetzen*] is allayed when he finds that the proffered eyes are only harmless spectacles' (U1: 229; my emphasis). But he leaves unexplained the precise relationship between the student's de-posed unsettledness and the sense of the uncanny supposedly enveloping him.

There would be a lot to say about psychoanalysis and its affinity to and critique of the logic of positing, most apparent in terms like *Besetzung* ('cathexis') or *Entstellung* ('dislocation', 'distortion' or 'de-presentation'). For the moment, however, I can only offer some concluding reflections on 'The Uncanny' and its inevitable renitence theoretically to integrate *Entsetzen*. My suggestion would be that

Freud's entire argument on Hoffmann hinges upon an exclusion of *Entsetzen*, and I mean this not in the banal sense that there can only be 'one' psychological mood upon which the narrative is premised (we have seen how the uncanny inevitably brings about ambivalence and dual entanglements). Rather, one could claim that the structure of Freud's argument about the uncanny needs to rely on the very logic of positing which *Entsetzen* undermines. Recall that Freud speaks of the uncanny in terms of a positional logic of causality, consistently calling it an 'effect' (without, however, clearly designating its cause). Consider also that the aesthetic uncanny is experienced to the extent that the reader is able to 'identify' with the fictional character (U1: 234) or 'translate himself' into another's 'state of feeling' (U1: 220)—the terms Freud uses here are 'versetzen' and 'sich hineinversetzen'.[4] Lastly, keep in mind that the very organ of the eyes, which, for Freud, acts as a stand-in for the genitals, relies, in its function as metaphor, on a primordial gesture of positing. Says Freud: 'But Olympia is an automaton [...] whose eyes have been *put in* [*eingesetzt*] by Coppola' (U1: 229; my emphasis).

In its essential aspects, the uncanny therefore relies on occupied places, topological shifts and thus on the logic of positionality. The 'uncanny effect' is a function of positional reason. Its essence is thetical; it relies on acts of putting in, setting down, shifting in and out and pairing up. For psychoanalysis, this means that while it may very well be the case that '*the ego is not master in its own house*', the topological reliance on the fixed position of a *house* appears to remain unquestioned.[5] Likewise, there already needs to be a posited 'home' (the *Heim* in *un*heim*lich*) for an 'uncanny effect' to occur. Uncanny effects describe shifts within a pre-given topology. *Das Entsetzliche*, I would argue, does not partake in this topology; it annihilates it. It undoes positings, positions and positional shifts, and thus describes a more fundamental occurrence than the uncanny. One may venture to claim that its de-posing is the uncanny's very condition of possibility.

Notes

[1] E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Der Sandmann*, ed. Rudolf Drux (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991), 7–8; 10–11; 29; 31 (translations and emphases mine).

[2] Hoffmann, 'Sandmann', 3 (emphasis mine).

3 See Werner Hamacher, 'Afformative, Strike', *Cardozo Law Review* 13.4 (1991): 1133–57, 1139.

4 Sigmund Freud, 'Das Unheimliche', *Studienausgabe*, vol. IV (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009), 241–74, 257; 244.

5 Sigmund Freud, 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis', *SE* 17: 137–44, 143.