

# The Dissolution of the Ego in Freud's Resolution of the Uncanny

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## Introduction

Freud's discussion of uncanny [*unheimlich*] experiences focuses on their peculiar ambivalence. On his view, the uncanny is a paradoxical feeling of both familiarity and alienation.<sup>1</sup> While Freud's analysis of this paradoxical feeling does succeed in explaining it *away*, it does little to *explain* it. One might expect a psychoanalytical demystification of the real experience that is hidden behind the superstitious overtones of uncanny experiences. Instead, the uncanny is attributed rather anti-climactically to the combination of a *previous* superstition (maintained unconsciously) and an entirely coincidental verification of that superstition:

As soon as something *actually happens* in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs [in the omnipotence of thoughts] we get a feeling of the uncanny; it as though we were making a judgment something like this: "So, after all, it is *true* that one can kill a person by the mere wish!" (1919, 247)

The implication is that there *is* no uncanny per se. There is no distinctive category of experience, the unique character of which tends to *cause* or encourage superstitious beliefs; rather, such beliefs are prerequisite to having the experience. In other words, the experience suits the belief, and not vice-versa. The uncanny is the fantasized verification of a repressed fantasy. It involves a breakdown of the reality principle and the projection of beliefs into the external world, rather than a peculiarity of feeling that can be linked intrinsically to a specific category of experience.

I do not intend to reject this analysis in its entirety. The basic structure, repression and return, is sound. However, Freud's analysis of the uncanny, which resolves uncanny ambivalence into the separate categories of consciousness and unconsciousness, merely reinstates the problematical opposition of *das heimliche* and *das unheimliche*, familiar and unfamiliar, within the mind rather than in the external

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<sup>1</sup> See 1919, 220: "The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" and 226: "Thus *heimlich* [homely, familiar] is a word the meaning of which

world. The coincidence of the two feelings in uncanny experience cannot be explained without an intervening stage between repression and return. I will suggest that Freud's characterization of uncanniness as the return, in superstition, of the repressed is a misplacement of the experience of uncanniness. The aesthetical feeling is the cause of, but not identical to, the projected superstitions and ideas which surround it. An explanation of the *feeling* of uncanniness must fall not on the side of the repressed, but on the side of *consciousness*.

The import of my position is that the feeling of uncanniness refers, in a manner of speaking, to something "real," rather than merely to infantile ideas projected upon the external world. Freud's explanation makes the unconscious a kind of scapegoat to be blamed for imposing fundamentally irrational beliefs into our interpretation of present experience, in that way preserving a model of the conscious ego as autonomous, fundamentally attuned to reality and ultimately independent of the unconscious. I will argue, on the contrary, that the experience of the uncanny is not merely a falling back into irrational or infantile beliefs, but an experience of a deep disunity in personhood that rightly causes us to question our everyday confidence in the unity, independence, and rationality of our conscious sense of self. The ambivalence of the feeling has its source in an irresolvable ambivalence that can exist in consciousness, and not simply in an analytically resolvable psychical ambivalence between consciousness and the unconscious.

## 1. Diagnosis of the Uncanny: *Das Heimliche* and *Das Unheimliche*

Freud's scapegoat for the feeling of uncanniness is twofold. The repressed ideas or beliefs which he considers prerequisite to the process are attributed to both the infant and the primitive, "the prehistory of the individual and of the race" (1919, 245).<sup>2</sup> "Primitive" human beliefs include animism, the demonic, omnipotence of

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develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a subspecies of *heimlich*."

<sup>2</sup> From start to finish, "The Uncanny" is replete with references to the primitive and infantile elements of this aesthetical phenomenon. Although this constant emphasis is presumably justified by the role of the repressed, it should be viewed with suspicion. The repressed is ancient and alien to consciousness, but it is fundamental to psychoanalytical theory that its activities should not be as distant and unrelated to the workings of consciousness as we would prefer to believe. Freud's overemphasis upon the character of these ideas or beliefs as archaic or infantile is in tension with the theoretical purpose of speaking about the repressed, which is presumably to reveal its causal power

thought, and the like. These beliefs, in turn, have their source in the infantile condition of primary narcissism, a stage prior to the distinctions of self and other, real and imaginary (1913, 88-90).

In both cases, the source of the uncanny is an absence or deficiency of the reality principle in its modification of the pleasure principle. Together they fulfill the first precondition of an originally *heimlich* idea or belief: “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (1919, 241). The second precondition is, of course, a subject who has not entirely succeeded in this repression—the condition for a recurrence of the repressed:<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who has completely and finally rid himself of animistic beliefs will be insensible to this type of the uncanny. The most remarkable coincidences of wish and fulfillment, the most mysterious repetition of similar experiences in a particular place or on a particular date, the most deceptive sights and suspicious noises—none of these things will disconcert him or raise the kind of fear which can be described as “a fear of something uncanny.” The whole thing is *purely an affair of “reality-testing,” a question of the material reality* of the phenomena (1919, 248). (Italics mine.)

Presumably, anyone who has successfully surmounted outmoded beliefs in favor of perfect adherence to the reality principle will be completely impervious to uncanny feelings. However, this ideally healthy form of psychical development is relatively rare. Corresponding to the infant and the primitive, we have two contemporary counterparts. The first includes those with “infantile complexes” such as “womb fantasies” and fear of castration whose unconscious processes are firmly modeled upon an infant’s view of the world (1919, 248). The second includes “supposedly educated” but mildly superstitious adults who have not entirely detached themselves from the fantasies of infancy. This category is a vast one, “since almost all of us still think as savages do” in matters such as religion and piety (1919, 242). With the help of infantile complexes and the general populace, the second condition of the uncanny is

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in the minds of civilized adults. Of the many references, see 1919, 233, 235, 238, 240, 242-43, 245, 247, 249, and 252.

<sup>3</sup> Freud makes a somewhat ambiguous distinction between an uncanny of the “repressed” and of the “surmounted.” I address this distinction below, Section 7.

fulfilled: a potential breakdown or dysfunction of the reality principle and the possibility for a return of the repressed.<sup>4</sup>

The ambivalence of the uncanny appears to be resolved. The feeling evokes an irrational, impossible identity of opposites. Something appears simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, domestic and foreign, private and public, holy and unclean, etc. (1919, 222-23 and 1913, 18, 25). But Freud too quickly assumes that such a paradoxical feeling cannot possibly be, even in a modest or indirect sense, an accurate interpretation of experience: we can *feel* uncanny, but surely nothing—neither the subject nor the object of experience—really *is* uncanny. The ambivalence must be analyzed away, traced to two distinct and separate sources—the external and internal, reality and fantasy, consciousness and the repressed, mental health and neurosis, etc. In Freud’s explanation, the ambivalence of the content is resolved on the side of familiarity. On his view, what returns is not, in actual fact, alien to consciousness; it has only been distanced from the familiar and consequently *forgotten*.

## 2. The Analytic Process: Curing the Uncanny

Freud’s resolution is a reasonable one, enacted both by and on behalf of the reality principle. The feeling known as uncanniness is treated as though it were a patient under analysis. The subjects who have fallen victim to this dubious sensation are likewise placed under analysis. Uncanniness is a symptom of delusion or illness in the patient, a projection of wish and fantasy by the unconscious onto the external world. This pathological strategy of projection is thwarted when the analyst reveals its true origin in the repressed, in the patient’s mind rather than in the external world. The analyst cures the patient of uncanniness by taking up the position of the external world and its psychical representative, the conscious ego, reinstating the primacy of the “reality-ego” over the “pleasure-ego” through the method of “reality-testing”:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1919, 244: “An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.... The infantile element in this, which also dominates the minds of neurotics, is the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality.”

<sup>5</sup> See 1923, 56: “As a frontier-creature, the ego tries to mediate between the world and the id, to make the id pliable to the world... In point of fact it behaves like the physician during an analytic treatment.” See also 1920, 20: “There is no doubt that the resistance of the conscious and unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed. *Our* efforts, on the other hand, are directed towards procuring the toleration of that unpleasure by an appeal to the reality principle.”

It is now no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered *in perception (reality)* [emphasis mine] as well. It is, we see, once more a question of *external* and *internal*. What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; *what is real is also there outside* [emphasis mine]. (1925, 237)

In Freud's examples of the uncanny, the application of this therapeutic method to fantastic projection is relatively simple. For example, the uncanny fear of "the evil eye," or fear of other peoples' envy, results when one "projects onto them the envy he would have felt in their place" (1919, 240). The malevolence I find in the world is there because I have placed it there. It is thoroughly *heimlich* because it is *mine*, yet it is *unheimlich* precisely to the extent that I have alienated it from my conscious ego. Likewise, the fear of the demonic, of the all-powerful thoughts of others, is also projection—in this case, of a narcissistic belief in the omnipotence of one's *own* thoughts (1919, 240). And, once again, the sensation of involuntary repetition, "the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of 'chance'," is a case of attributing to the external world the compulsion to repeat that characterizes one's own internal instincts (1919, 237).

However, Freud's method of external verification is somewhat *too* successful. The *unconscious* is, after all, both "real" and not to be found "there outside," as the reality principle demands. It fails in the face of the reality principle's first criterion. Of course, this is perfectly in keeping with the analyst's perspective toward the patient. The contents of the patient's unconscious are not "real" when viewed as claims about the contents of the external world. But the question is precisely whether or not the unconscious and its ideas are *themselves* real—i.e. really "there" *in* the psychical structure. The unconscious of psychoanalysis and the phantasmal, animistic world of the primitive are in many respects analogous. Both repression and projection are a rejection of something by consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Reality is outside of the individual mind,

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Note that Freud often equivocates on the issue of whether ego or super-ego is responsible for reality testing, though he usually leans toward the former.

<sup>6</sup> 1920, 29: "A particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as means of defense against them. This is the origin of *projection*." See also 1915a, 147:

while the repressed is “outside” of the conscious ego. The unconscious is a kind of “external world,” an outside contained *inside* the mind:

The psychoanalytical assumption of unconscious mental activity appears to us...as a further expansion of the primitive animism which caused us to see copies of our own consciousness all around us. (1915b, 171)<sup>7</sup>

The Middle Ages quite consistently ascribed all such maladies [epilepsy and madness] to the influence of demons, and in this their psychology was almost correct. Indeed, I should not be surprised to hear that psychoanalysis, which is concerned with laying bare these hidden forces, has itself become uncanny to many people for that very reason. (1919, 243)

Freud’s worldview is suddenly not sufficiently distant from that of his patient, and the comforting distinction between the perspectives of reality and fantasy becomes a bit hazy. Nor is this a superficial similarity. Freud’s resolution of the uncanny is endangered by the similarity. To be sure, the projection of the uncanny into the external world is seen to be merely that—a projection. But the trouble has merely shifted from the relation of the subject to the world into the psyche. The question is now one of the *subject’s* ambivalent identity.

### 3. The Analyst Analyzed

The distinction and parallels between animism and psychoanalysis must be made explicit. The superstitious uncanny and the psychoanalytical uncanny can be viewed in two ways—in relation to the feeling of uncanniness or to its consequences for consciousness. I have, in keeping with Freud’s analysis, emphasized the latter—the consequences of the uncanny for our beliefs about the external world. However, viewed in this way, the psychoanalytical point of view undermines itself: the analyst becomes too similar to the patient, making the resolution of the problem suspect.

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“The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.”

<sup>7</sup> Notice the crucial phrase: “*copies* of our own *consciousness*.” This is the central element that separates the animistic from the psychoanalytical viewpoint—and, as I will suggest, a distinction that Freud’s analysis of the uncanny fails to uphold. (See below, Section 7.)

The conclusions of both psychoanalysis and superstition suffice to explain the ambivalence of the experience by appeal to opposite categories,<sup>8</sup> and both views appeal only indirectly to the reality principle. Superstition proposes a spirit world as explanation, and psychoanalysis proposes the unconscious. Both fail the test of the reality principle, since both posit explanations that are inaccessible to perception and refer to causal agencies that are not part of the external world—no small matter, given the reasonable consensus that psychoanalytic method fails to meet scientific standards of verification. The contents of both views are inferred from inexplicable events (perceived both externally and internally), and both are supposed verified by their capacity to explain a phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the parallels between the specific elements in each are at times quite remarkable. The superstitious subject has an ambivalent sensation of familiarity and alienation. The *consequence* of this feeling is a projection into the external world—e.g., that there are spirits, evil thoughts, or an external agency of fate acting upon the subject. These projections are characteristic of animism in general—forces external to consciousness which act upon the subject against her will. Their familiarity is understood as either likeness (the “double”) or repetition (fate). In a similar way, psychoanalysis postulates (it is tempting to say “projects”) analogous entities and forces that are external to consciousness: demons or spirits correspond to specific desires or instincts, and fate corresponds to the compulsion to repeat that is characteristic of the “death instincts.”

This parallel becomes even more evident in another common example of the uncanny, though one that is overlooked in this essay—that of *déjà vu*. Freud does, however, address it in the essay “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.” The superstitious projection in this case is not a second, contemporaneous agency, but a *previous* agency: “A naïvely mystical and unpsychological attempt at explaining the phenomena of ‘*déjà vu*’ endeavors to find evidence in it of a former existence of our

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<sup>8</sup> In the former, conscious ideas as opposed to unconscious ones. In the latter, the opposition of the ego to the external world.

<sup>9</sup> See 1915b, “Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious,” esp. 167: “they [conscious acts] fall into a demonstrable connection if we interpolate between them the unconscious acts which we have inferred. A gain in meaning is a perfectly justifiable ground for going beyond the limits of direct experience.” In Freud’s account of uncanniness as the accidental, apparent verification of surmounted beliefs—“So, after all, it is *true* that one can kill a person by the mere wish!”—the problem of verification is, as in psychanalytic method, not simply its anecdotal nature but its attribution of an event in the external world to an unconscious cause that is inaccessible on principle to observation (1919, 247).

mental self” (1936, 245). The projection is, in this case, a temporal one. The subject is now acted upon by the character and experience of an *older self*. The familiarity involved is explained as a repetition of experience *and* a doubling of the self. Psychoanalysis once again has a corresponding notion—the earlier mentioned narcissistic infant (the previous self of the individual), as well as the primitive psyche (the previous self of the species). What are these but the doubles or the earlier-mentioned “copies of consciousness” of psychoanalysis? In the analysis of the uncanny, the analyst is encountering but denying recognition of her own surmounted double—a crucial clue to how the analysis gone astray.

#### 4. Dislocating the Uncanny

The point of bringing out this parallel is not to call into question the basic tenets of psychoanalytical theory. On the contrary, the primary difficulty in Freud’s analysis is that it is inconsistent with his general theory.<sup>10</sup> To return to a distinction I made earlier, the uncanny can be viewed either in terms of the feeling associated with it, or with the superstitious explanations and beliefs to which it gives rise or encourages. Freud emphasizes the patient’s *reactions* to the uncanny (the superstitions associated with it) and assumes that they are *identical to or an explanation of* the feeling of uncanniness. The phenomenon is then explained by analyzing the psychological causes of such a reaction. By emphasizing the projections and superstitious explanations of the patient, we are led to the patient’s repressed wishes. Rather than an analysis of the *relation* of the conscious to the repressed, Freud’s analysis becomes

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<sup>10</sup> Although my critique is internal, identifying an inconsistency between his account of uncanniness and his general theory, it does not require accepting the general theory. As Mark Windsor rightly points out, Freud’s theory of the uncanny is already precarious simply in virtue of its dependence on psychoanalytic theory: “My purpose in rehearsing these fundamentals of psychoanalysis is to highlight just how much one needs to accept in order to subscribe to the theory. Return of the repressed requires a burdensome subscription to some of the most dubious tenets of psychoanalytic theory: a developmental account that postulates the existence of universal infantile sexual complexes, and a theory of mind that accommodates the unconscious psychodynamic processes of the dream-work by which the content of such complexes may be repressed” (2020, 39). I will offer an alternative theory of the uncanny that draws on Freud’s psychology, but only on his broader theory of the unconscious and repression. On the other hand, while I will emphasize problems in Freud’s theory of the uncanny in keeping with the consensus about the unverifiability and non-scientific status of psychoanalysis’s core tenets, I will do so in a way that emphasizes that first-person subjective experiences, as affirmed in psychoanalytic theory, literature, and aesthetic experience generally—and, to a lesser degree in philosophy—offer genuine and deep, if non-scientific, insight into the human condition.



one of repression and projection—that is, of their *alienation*. It fastens itself to either pole of the uncanny—the familiar or the unfamiliar.

But this tells us nothing about the moment in which the two coincide: the moment of conscious awareness of simultaneous feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity. If we view the matter from either side only (that of the repressed and unfamiliar or of the absence of repression and the familiar), then the central issue of ambivalence evaporates. For example, if my repressed belief in animism appears, in my view, to be *verified* by some experience, I simply move from disbelief to definitive belief. There is little sense in calling this “uncanny”; my relation to an idea has merely changed from unfamiliarity to familiarity, from alienation to identification. If the subject does indeed believe in the ideas of her infancy, i.e. if the idea simply becomes consciously maintained, then it *ceases* to be *unheimlich*. There must be a tension between belief and disbelief for the feeling to capture both senses. Freud’s comments about the uncanny experiences of “obsessional neurotics” exemplify this point:

They are never surprised at their invariably running up against someone they have just been thinking of, perhaps for the first time for a long while. If they say one day “I haven’t had any news of so-and-so for a long time,” they will be sure to get a letter from him the next morning, and an accident or a death will rarely take place without having passed through their mind a little while before. They are in the habit of referring to this state of affairs in the most modest manner, saying that they have “presentiments” which “usually” come true (1919, 239-40).

The obsessional neurotic is as indifferent to uncanny coincidences as the impossibly healthy and repression-free realist we encountered earlier. The average person may find such happenings uncanny, but the infantile patient who experiences them remains unmoved; she is far too familiar with (and far too convinced of) the ways of the animistic world to find such happenings mysterious.

The *absence* of uncanny feelings is *shared* by the realist and the dreamer, the repression-free and the fully repressed. The positions of analyst and patient are not merely analogous; both lead *away* from the essay’s purported subject matter. Having thoroughly quit the repressed, the realist finds the uncanny thoroughly *unheimlich*. And having, upon the external confirmation of the repressed, fallen once again under its spell, the neurotic finds the uncanny thoroughly *heimlich*. Perhaps, then, it is not *merely*

“a matter of reality-testing”—as Freud would have it? The paradigmatic case of the uncanny must be found *between* the limit cases of the ailing patient and the cured patient, rather than distributed between the two. That is, the uncanny is a “return” of the repressed, *not* in the form of symptoms, but in the form of *conscious* material—the moment in which unconscious and conscious processes meet. And this implies that the uncanny has more to do with the cure than with disease.

## 5. Relocation: The Canny Cure

The “return of the repressed” cannot convincingly explain the element of the *Heimliche* in the uncanny. Unlike uncanniness, symptoms and projections based in repression are the alienation of an idea, a simple rejection of familiarity. They are attempts to evade reacquaintance, in consciousness, with the repressed. But it is precisely recognition and even conscious acknowledgement of the repressed that Freud has emphasized in his attempt to explain the familiarity of the uncanny: “So, *after all*, it is true!” “So the dead *do* live on!” etc. (1919, 248). The initial attitude of someone in the grip of the uncanny is one of conviction: a previous judgment is disavowed, and an affirmation is underscored, as though the individual thinks, “I didn’t believe it *before*, but I do *now*!”

But this is an entirely different matter than superstitious ideas about ghosts, doubles, and the like. A superstitious person’s attitude is one of fear and suspicion rather than conviction. Her statements tend to be interrogative rather than assertive, e.g.: “What was that!” “Did you hear that?” “Shhh! Listen!” etc. She is *affected* as though she believed, but *consciously* takes the stance of the reality principle—she freezes, comes to attention, looks all around, and listens closely, searching for *evidence*. This tentative attitude (“Maybe it’s true after all,” “Could it be?,” “Is it really a...?”) hardly seems adequate. It may lead to fear, but not to uncanniness.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Heidegger’s contrast of *Angst* or anxiety to fear: “that in the face of which we fear is a detrimental entity within-the-world which comes from some definite region but is close by and is bringing itself close, and yet might stay away” (230/H 185). In anxiety, in contrast, “What is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away, and so, in general, do entities within-the-world. The ‘world’ can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of Others. Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the ‘world’ and the way things have been publicly interpreted. Anxiety throws Dasein back upon that which it is anxious about—its authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world” (232/H 187). Heidegger identifies this collapse of the world as it is interpreted and constituted by shared social beliefs and practices with a recognition that such a socially constructed world cannot serve as an absolute foundation for choice,

What is the difference between these two attitudes? The superstitious feeling has the appropriate emotional effects, but the idea is positioned at a distance from the self. One treats it as *someone else's* idea—an idea that may be true pending further evidence. In case of the exclamation of conviction, on the other hand, one adopts the standpoint of the idea. I treat the idea as my own. The crux of the matter is not the content of the idea, by an individual's relation to it.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, the uncanny may be understood either in light of the ideas and superstitions that surround it, or in light of the feeling itself. Freud tends to skirt the latter, though toward the end of the essay he finally addresses the distinction in his explanation of why the uncanny themes of some stories do not evoke uncanny feelings in their readers: “In the Herodotus story<sup>13</sup>...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” (1919, 252). This is a significant development; unfortunately it does not occur until the last page of the essay. A crucial factor in the uncanny is one's *place* in relation to an idea. This fact supports my rejection of the uncanny as a symptom and return of the repressed: “Substitutive formations and symptoms...are indications of a return of the repressed” (1915a, 154). These substitutes serve as a compromise between successful repression and the successful lifting of repression. In effect, the repressed is revealed in disguise, distanced from the ego in virtue of the connections that lie between the symptom or substitute and the repressed idea.

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a recognition that produces the feeling of uncanniness as a deep sense of “not-at-homeness,” a recognition that humanity's home is always a produced world, a call to decision rather than a refuge from it: “as Dasein falls, anxiety brings it back from its absorption in the ‘world.’ Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualized, but individualized as Being-in-the-world. Being-in enters into the existential ‘mode’ of the ‘not-at-home.’ Nothing else is meant by our talk about ‘uncanniness’” (233/H 189). In this spirit, we might worry that Freud's suggestion that uncanniness is rooted in primitive fear of external threats fails precisely to recognize the real object of the uncanny: human nature, not the external world or our beliefs about it.

<sup>12</sup> Contrast Mark Windsor: “rather than define the uncanny in terms of ‘primitive’ beliefs in magical and animistic phenomena which have been ‘surmounted,’ I suggest that this dubious appearance of the supernatural can be better understood in terms of an apparent impossibility” (2019, 59). This skeptical attitude of apparent impossibility does not capture the way uncanniness attaches itself to the *self* in an ambiguous feeling of *conviction*. Although Windsor is correct that we should not make the particular content of beliefs a necessary condition of uncanniness, we should not abandon Freud's emphasis upon the individual's affective personal connection, their belief in, a seeming impossibility, the root of uncanniness as an emotional rather than cognitive state of uncertainty.

<sup>13</sup> 1919, 246: “story of the treasure of Rhampsinitus, in which the master-thief, whom the princess tries to hold fast by the hand, leaves his brother's severed hand behind with her instead.”

Literature, too, is a substitute of sorts; it distances the reader from the repressed by cloaking it not only in language, but also in metaphor, imagery, narrative, and character. However, by encouraging identification with the appropriate character in the narrative, the author can place the reader into the world of these substitutes and into the position of the “I” that “experiences” uncanny events. That is, literature is effectively uncanny only insofar as it undermines the defensive mechanism of substitute and symptom—only insofar as it overcomes the distance between the “I” and the repressed.

Rather than being a return of repression, the uncanny may be closer to a lifting of repression. The element of the *heimliche* in the uncanny depends upon the way in which the subject relates to the repressed idea. And it is comparable to the way in which repression is lifted in the procedure of analysis. The removal of repression depends upon the connection between the ideas (“presentations”) introduced externally by the analyst and the originally repressed idea in the patient’s unconscious:

What we have permissively called the conscious presentation of the object can now be split up into the thing presentation of the *word* and the presentation of the *thing*; the latter consists in the cathexis, if not the direct memory-images of the thing, at least of remoter memory-traces derived from these.... The conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone.... The system *Pcs.* comes about by this thing-presentation being hypercatheted through being linked with the word-presentations corresponding to it. (1915b, 201-02)

The connection of the repressed to consciousness is the link of the catheted “thing” to its corresponding word. Abstruse as this explanation may be, the general point is simple: the lifting of the repressed involves being conscious of an idea in two connected ways—generally speaking, on the intellectual level (word and meaning) and on the emotional and libidinal level (the “thing” charged with cathexis, invested with instinctual energy or motivation).

In our example of superstition, the distance felt between the subject and the idea—despite the presence of appropriate emotive affects such as fear—can be understood as the subject having consciousness of the *thing*-presentation while continuing to repress the *word*-presentation to which it belongs: “If a repression does

not succeed in preventing feelings of unpleasure from arising, we may say that it has failed, even though it may have achieved its purpose as far as the ideational portion is concerned” (1915a, 153). And the feeling of distance in the third-person perspective of certain stories can be understood as the reader having the “words” in consciousness without the corresponding libidinal charge:

If we communicate to a patient some idea which he has at one time repressed but which we have discovered in him, our telling him makes at first no change in his mental condition. Above all, it does not remove the repression nor undo its effects, as might perhaps be expected from the fact that the previously unconscious idea has now become conscious. On the contrary, all that we shall achieve at first will be a fresh rejection of the repressed idea. (1915b, 175)

In both cases, we have a fitting description of an experience that dwells too much upon the *unfamiliar* to qualify as uncanny. The subject is consciously aware of one or the other element of the idea—the ideational or affective repressed. But because she lacks the link between the two, she does not fully take up the idea as her own.

## 6. Locating Negation

It may be objected that Freud’s original dilemma remains. If the uncanny is too *unheimlich* then the feeling is lost. But now the uncanny is too *heimlich*, and with the same consequence. The subject now appears to be identical to our earlier neurotic obsessive, who is so convinced of uncanny events as to find them mundane.

However, the emphasis in our explanation must fall upon the *heimliche* because this is the moment of coming to consciousness. Only if the repressed is in consciousness can the tension between the previously unfamiliar and the currently familiar be felt and identified—since *both* are now conscious. If, on the contrary, we take Freud’s approach, we become indefinitely trapped in the unfamiliar, with little hope of incorporating the other half of the conscious tension. If the repressed has returned but not been lifted, then the patient may be conscious of the *unheimliche* of either word- or thing-presentation. But without both, she will not *recognize* it. It will simply be an unfamiliar idea or feeling that cannot be connected to herself.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> H. G. Bartholomew rightly insists that uncanniness is rooted not just in belief but in reality, drawing on the view of “object-oriented ontology” that reality is “paradoxical and contradictory, a place where the form of things is haunted by withdrawn essences. Reality is *weird*.... being is uncanny because being is itself double: objects are their own doppelgängers” (2019, 376). However,

recognition of both poles of the uncanny can only be made in the opposite direction. Upon the removal of repression, she adopts the idea as her own. It is fully conscious, alongside the ideas that she previously held in consciousness. Both old ideas and new, as well as old affects and new—her emotional connection to those beliefs, are present to awareness. She holds *heimlich* and *unheimlich* ideas at once, fully conscious in both ideational and affective content.<sup>15</sup>

This clarifies the central difficulty in Freud’s analysis. He has resolved the ambivalence of the feeling into consciously and unconsciously maintained ideas. But insofar as this opposition is preserved, only the conscious part can be accounted for in the actual feeling that is to be explained. To be sure, one can still feel the emotional affect associated with an unconscious idea, but those affects cannot be *recognized as familiar* in virtue of their relation to a previously held idea *of which one is unconscious*. He resolves the ambivalence of the uncanny in its projected relation to the world, but the ambivalence is reinstated in the psychical structure, and the only possible route to a conscious experience of both aspects is blocked.

There cannot be an ambivalence of feeling between incompatible ideas unless it is ambivalence in consciousness. That ambivalence is, in a manner of speaking, a “real” one. The uncanny is real; it exists not as a projection of fantasy upon the world (internal to external), nor as a distribution between consciousness and unconsciousness, but as a conscious experience in a *single* psychical system. If two contrary ideas are simultaneously held in consciousness, then the dualism cannot

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the *ego* is the only object that can ground uncanny experience, for even if “real objects and qualities withdraw from any and all relations while sensual objects and qualities ‘appear’ and interact,” only the ego can appear to itself *in its self-withdrawal*, recognizing a belief’s emotional power over it (the instinctual cathexis of a thing-presentation), while cognitively denying its content (the word presentation) (2019, 375).

<sup>15</sup> Windsor argues against Freud’s theory of the uncanny as a return of the repressed in favor of his theory of the uncanny as the return of a surmounted belief: “The content of a surmounted primitive belief is not unconscious in the way that the latent content of a repressed complex necessarily is. Surmounted beliefs are not transformed through unconscious processes of the dream-work in the way that the manifest contents of repressed complexes are. The content of a ‘primitive’ belief, such as belief in the existence of spirits, does not change when it is surmounted; only one’s attitude to it does” (2020, p. 42). However, that account fails precisely because, as Freud describes the return of surmounted belief, one’s attitude has changed. Uncanniness requires a return of the affect associated with the surmounted belief—the individual must momentarily *feel* that spirits are real, for example, not simply recall having once believed in them. For that reason, we might interpret surmounted belief as a modest degree of repression rather than a distinct mechanism, allowing that only our conscious attitude to an idea has changed, while the unconscious cathexis of that idea remains in place, as necessary to explain uncanniness in its emotional and aesthetical aspect.

result in an opposition. The “I” (the conscious ego) contains both; it is, as it were, cut into two by the uncanny. But it cannot *become* two. An individual cannot coherently think, for example, “I don’t believe *x*, but my *id* does.” For she is aware of the idea, it no longer “belongs” to the unconscious. She can escape the ambivalence only by removing it—i.e., by rejecting the originally repressed a *second* time, and alienating from the ego those contents that divide it.

This is, I believe, precisely what happens. The procedure of the uncanny both begins and ends in repression, in a way very similar to Freud’s explanation of jokes:

Special techniques have evolved, with the purpose of bringing about such changes in the play of mental forces that what would otherwise give rise to unpleasure may on this occasion result in pleasure; and, whenever a technical device of this sort comes into operation, the repression of an instinctual representative which would otherwise be repudiated is lifted.... These techniques have till now only been studied in any detail in jokes. As a rule the repression is only temporarily lifted and is promptly reinstated. (1915a, 151)

On this interpretation, the unpleasure that is avoided through repression is nothing more than an insupportable incoherence in the ego—a threat, not to its pleasure, but to its integrity. Against Freud’s view that the uncanny is experienced as an external threat to our physical wellbeing (fear of fate, the demonic, malevolence etc.), we can now recognize that we experience uncanniness primarily as a threat to our sense of self.<sup>16</sup> The motivation is not superstition but self-alienation: “‘It shall be inside me’ or ‘it shall be outside me’.... What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical” (1925, 237).

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Groarke suggests a similar link between uncanniness and a problem in our sense of identity, emphasizing the way the act of recollection retroactively introduces continuity in our sense of self: “In this respect, the ‘unity’ of the acting person is given in the act of articulation in language. Our sense of personal identity is brought about not in the intentionality of temporal awareness (the phenomenological ‘identity’ of our past, present, and future selves), but, rather, by the accounts that we give of ourselves in time” (2020, p. 300). However, this still makes the primary object of the uncanny something other than the ego, namely, the unfamiliarity of a *past event* as reconstructed by memory, while I wish to emphasize the way this cognitive disruption of past events reveals a *present affective* disruption in the self. What is distinctive is the feeling that I emotionally relate to a belief or desire that I do not cognitively recognize as mine, a paradoxical feeling that I believe something I do not believe or desire something I do not desire, an awareness that there is a part of myself that is not only deeply unfamiliar but nevertheless active in me, having potentially greater power over my affective states than my conscious identity does—an experience of my *self as fatality*.

This final repression, then, is a repression *of* the uncanny, a denial and forgetting of that moment in which our sense of self-identity and self-possession was endangered.<sup>17</sup> Freud is correct in the claim that “the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimlich*, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ is the token of repression” (1919, 245). However, he is mistaken to attribute this to the original repression of the completely familiar. What is momentarily familiar and subsequently rejected is precisely the *uncanniness of the ego*, the deep ambivalence of personhood. The subject moves from the conviction, “So it *is* true!” to the recognition of its inconsistency with other ego-contents and, consequently, to a fresh rejection. The aesthetic feeling of recognition is quickly followed by disavowal—something to the effect of “Well, that *was* uncanny!” or “For a *minute*, I *almost* thought . . .” The feeling is at once acknowledged and put at a distance by the reaction to the feeling. But that rejection is also a confession of one’s identity with the repressed, a recognition that the ego is always self-alienated, always divided, always partially under the spell of what is unthought or repressed—that the *Ich* is the real uncanny, an *unheiml-Ich*.

## 7. Relocating the Analyst

We have seen that the uncanny, when interpreted as a strategy for temporary release of the repressed, finds itself in a position surprisingly similar to that of the analyst in psychoanalysis. Admittedly, it is firmly in the service of the pleasure principle, but it is not entirely reality’s foe. It does not permanently surmount the repressed but serves reality indirectly. The repressed desire, wish, or belief may not provide knowledge of the external world, but—like jokes and slips of the tongue—the uncanny brings to consciousness the reality *that there is* a repressed. It also presents a

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<sup>17</sup> As Windsor points out, Freud “fails to explain what is distinctive about uncanny phenomena. What makes this patently clear is that Freud uses broadly the same theory—of something repressed in the mind that then returns to consciousness—to explain a whole range of psychological and behavioral phenomena, including dreams, errors (or ‘parapraxes’), jokes, and neurotic symptoms” (2020, p. 40). However, this is not, as Windsor argues, because Freud’s explanation depends upon the return of the repressed, but because of the *way* in which that return occurs. In my alternative account, the feeling of uncanniness is aesthetically distinguished from dreams, parapraxes, and jokes as a return, not of a particular content of consciousness, but of the fact *that there is* an unconscious, a return of the repressed experienced not as representation (a dream symbol, a slip of the tongue), but as a *feeling of contradictory identity*, for example, simultaneously experiencing the emotional affect of a belief in demons and consciously identifying it as not mine (an inversion of the common experience of cognitively recognizing, with the help of another’s accusation and external evidence, that one is acting from an emotion that one does not actively feel, such as love or envy.)



brief glimpse of the tenuous position of the ego in the psychical structure, the fragility of its independence from the surrounding psychological topography. In the moment of its ambivalence, the conscious ego recognizes that its attempt to sharply distinguish itself from either super-ego or id is an act of fantasy. And with a fresh rejection, the ego attempts to banish this insight from memory.

The uncanniness of ambivalent consciousness provides a sufficiently peculiar feeling—not the unfamiliar familiarity of some idea or belief, but the unfamiliar familiarity of a moment of the conscious self. The added stipulation of specifically animistic or superstitious contents is not necessary. But it may still be argued that Freud’s analysis and the myths that surround the uncanny have not been accounted for. I suggest that both serve as examples of the disavowal of the uncanny. If that is the case, they are consequences of both insight and misunderstanding. As Freud has already suggested, psychoanalysis is an expansion of animism—and animism may, after all, have been inspired by an authentic insight into the uncanniness of the ego. Freud’s specific analysis in this essay, however, shares the same signs of repression that are displayed in the animistic and demonic interpretation of the uncanny.

In both cases, the emphasis falls upon the “un”; the experience is acknowledged at a distance:

The content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on the condition that it is *negated*. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed.... The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists. (1925, 235-36)

The animistic and Freudian explanations of the repressed both share this characteristic emphasis on negation. Superstitions develop around the uncanny as soon as someone exclaims, “That was uncanny!” Usually it takes a similar form of double negation. First the individual distances the feeling temporally, as if to say, “It *was* uncanny, but it no longer is so.” Then she negates it a second time—as if to say, “On second thought, it wasn’t canny *at all*, I *never had* the feeling in the first place.” The idea is rejected as not-mine and attributed to a double.

In the animistic rejection of uncanniness, the individual treats her own thoughts as invasions from the outside: the double that serves as scapegoat,

preserving her sense of self, is a fate that manipulates her against her will or a demon that takes over her thoughts and actions. The blame is shifted outside of the self.<sup>18</sup> In the Freudian rejection of uncanniness, the double again takes the form of representing the *unconscious* as *a separate consciousness*. First and foremost in this representative role are the earlier-mentioned scapegoats—infants, primitives, and neurotics. These are the demons of animism, tailored to appease the reality principle. Evidence of Freud’s own motivated rejection of personal familiarity with the uncanny, followed by a shifting of blame to a double who is familiar with it, can be found throughout the essay. But the original clue that should catch our attention is Freud’s first introduction of the concept:

The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter, where extreme delicacy would be more in place. It is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression, and he must start by translating himself into the state of that feeling, by awakening in himself the possibility of experiencing it. (1919, 220)

This rejection results in the original split in Freud’s analysis between reality and fantasy, analyst and patient and, most importantly, between the psychoanalytic and the animistic. Their identity in a single ambivalent origin is betrayed by the symptoms they share: the uncanny resemblance of analyst and patient that I suggested earlier. Reality and fantasy are projected images of “good” and “bad” fathers, as in E. T. A. Hoffman’s story “The Sandman”: “In the story of Nathaniel’s childhood, the figures of his father and Coppélius represent the two opposites into which the father-*imago* is split by his ambivalence.... The double occurrence of activity in common betrays them as divisions of the father-*imago*” (1919, 232, footnote 1).

Freud’s disavowal of and self-distancing from uncanny experience is not, to be sure, always maintained. Despite his convenient “obtuseness” in such matters, he admits

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<sup>18</sup> Heidegger suggests that uncanniness is disavowed with the help of the scapegoat of *das Man*, the “One” or “They,” his name for an abstract, depersonalized concept of humanity reduced to fixed practices, purposes, and norms that individuals defer to in order to flee the anxiety of authentic decision: “When in falling we flee into the ‘at-home’ of publicness, we flee in the face of the ‘not-at-home’; that is, we flee in the face of the uncanniness which lies in *Dasein*—in *Dasein* as thrown Being-in-the-world, which has been delivered over to itself in its Being. This uncanniness pursues *Dasein* constantly, and is a threat to its everyday lostness in the ‘they’” (1927, 234/H 189).

three personal examples. One of these, an experience of the “double,” is hidden away in a footnote. Freud’s uncanny feeling, in this instance, is caused by mistaking his mirror image for an unlikable stranger. The confession is made, but quickly retracted with a shifting of blame: “Is it not possible that our dislike of them was a vestigial trace of the archaic reaction which feels the ‘double’ to be uncanny?” (1919, 248, footnote 1). *Freud* did not find the experience uncanny, after all—his *ancestors* did.

A second confession is not explicitly rejected, but instead left unanalyzed—despite the fact that the story positively begs for analysis. It begins with a walk in an unknown Italian town:

I found myself in a quarter of whose character *I could no longer remain in doubt*. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and *I hastened to leave* the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time...*I suddenly found myself back* in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to attract attention. (1919, 237, emphasis mine)

This return to the dubious quarter of indubitable character occurs three times. Obviously, the animistic notion of fatality will not serve as an explanation. However, he gives the reader no explanation at all. The traces of animism in the description are never explicitly disavowed. He, of course, wanted to get away from the neighborhood, but he was compelled to return by something other than himself.<sup>19</sup> He simply “found”

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<sup>19</sup> Hélène Cixous observes that Freud’s transparent defensiveness borders on comedy: “One other winding, and instead of the distress Freud claims to have experienced, we should be confronted with the irresistible comedy of Mark Twain. Question: how many repetitions are necessary before distress turns into comedy?” (1976, 540). Notice that whether we find the anecdote more uncanny than comic depends in part on how seriously we take the psychoanalytic theoretical context in which such blindly repetitive and compulsive behavior would be probable. In this way, too, there is a close analogy between the work of the analyst and the author: whether their stories cause or resolve uncanniness depends upon whether we experience them in first-person affective way or indirectly as literary representation. The seeming verification of psychoanalytic tenets experienced in a joke or slip of the tongue is in fact an uncanny experience: “So, after all, it is true that I have this feeling or belief that I did not realize I had!” But just as the feeling of uncanniness is lost when presented in the context of a fictional reality in which such happenings are ordinary, so too is it lost when embedded in the context of psychoanalytic theory’s purported reality—its topographies of id, ego, and superego, and its physics of repression and return. Psychoanalysis depends, then, in its scientific pretense and its power to persuade, on the literary device of making explanations probable “relative to one set of background assumptions,” as Greg Currie and Jon Jureidini stress in their explanation of why the improbability that underlies literary uncanniness is context-dependent: “The author need

himself there. The added comment about attracting attention only reinforces the suspicion that he is projecting his own feelings of guilt. In any case, in this instance a careful analysis distinguishing the elements of fantasy and reality in uncanniness is tellingly missing.

In the third example, we encounter a new double upon which Freud shifts blame: the literary author. Freud recounts an anecdote about reading a superstitious story that resulted in an uncanny feeling. Despite that admission, he does everything he can to distance himself from it:

In the middle of the isolation of wartime a number of the English “Strand Magazine” fell into my hands; and among other somewhat redundant matter, I read a story.... We are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life...or something of the sort. It was a naïve enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable. (1919, 244-45)

We might wonder why the accidental, casual perusal of such a silly, inconsequential story should have such a remarkable effect. Freud has identified uncanny experiences with the infantile, primitive, and repressed. And now he has explicitly identified with that feeling.

However, he is not yet ready to give up the distance that separates him from the more primitive minds of his patients. He resolves the matter by inventing a new, less-incriminating category of the uncanny: “the animistic beliefs of civilized people are in a state of having been (to a greater or lesser extent) *surmounted* [rather than repressed]” (1919, 249). But this notion of surmounted uncanny beliefs remains unconvincing. Truly “surmounted” beliefs would seem to lack the cathectic potency, the subjectively felt charge, that enables the uncanny in the first place. The return of the surmounted is not *heimlich* enough. Why would something that has been overcome, something mild enough in affect to not require repression, need to *return*? Freud’s explanation is a final self-doubling, a final shifting of blame:

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have no difficulty creating characters and events, where it is fictional that *those characters* find the events uncanny; he creates an otherwise mundane world in which something happens which, had it occurred in reality, it would have produced the kind of reaction that justify calling the event uncanny. There is then no barrier to our imagining that these characters find these events uncanny. But it is much harder to create effects that are uncanny from an external point of view” (2003, 560-61).

The *writer pretends* to move in the world of common reality... *He* is in a sense *betraying us* to the superstitiousness which we have ostensibly surmounted; *he deceives* us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it. (1919, 250, emphasis mine)

In the main we adopt an unvarying passive attitude towards real experience and are subject to the influence of our physical environment. But the storyteller has a *peculiarly* [italicized in the original] *directive power* over us, *he* is able to *guide the current* of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and *make it flow* in another. (1919, 251, emphasis mine)

This is, of course, quite true in its way. But the storyteller's peculiar powers cannot simply be a matter of fate, or gift, or *mana*. The author's ability to compel the reader is derived from the uncanny link found *within*, not outside of, the reader: the reader's own ambivalent ego, grounded in the reader's own unconscious. The author only superficially compels; the real agent of literary uncanniness is the *unheiml-Ich*.<sup>20</sup>

I have suggested that the difficulties in Freud's analysis of uncanniness are found not in its psychoanalytical foundations, but rather in its deviation from them. I can now more precisely identify how his analysis deviates from the foundations of his general

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<sup>20</sup> If it is the ego as such that is uncanny, then Freud's introductory opposition between those vulnerable to the experience and those who have "completely and finally rid" themselves of superstitious beliefs collapses—and with it, the clear division Freud implicitly draws between analyst and patient, science and superstition, psychoanalysis and literature (1919, 248). I have suggested that Freud hesitates to fully draw the consequences of his analysis in order to avoid acknowledging the similarities between superstitious and psychoanalytic explanations—including their ultimate unverifiability by scientific methods. Cixous goes further, suggesting that Freud betrays *envy* of the degree of unconscious, irrational control superstition and literature hold over individuals, suggesting that psychoanalytic theory might be a form of fiction that, by pretending not to be literature, inadvertently deprives itself of literature's superior power: "The writer is also what Freud wants to be. Freud sees in himself the writer, the one whom the analyst must question concerning the literature which psychoanalysis must understand in order to know itself. He is, in his relationship to the writer, as the *Unheimliche* is in its relation to the *Heimliche*" (1976, p. 532). While I have emphasized that this betrays the shared *untruth* of fiction and psychoanalysis as forms of causal explanation in the external world, Cixous suggests fiction's power is rooted in access to a form of truth that only fiction can reveal about the subjective form of our internal world, thanks to its capacity to reactivate awareness of repression aesthetically rather than cognitively and thus without surmounting it by projecting the unfamiliar onto a double, external object, or event: "As a Reserve of the Repressed, fiction is finally that which resists analysis and, thus, attracts it the most. Only the writer 'knows' and has the freedom to evoke or inhibit the *Unheimliche*" (1976, 547).

theory. He is treating the unconscious as another agent, disassociated from the ego, represented by the infant, the primitive, the neurotic, and the artist. In each case, the unconscious is presented as a *second consciousness*, a view Freud explicitly rejects in his formulation of the concept of the unconscious. He is, in other words, inadvertently appealing to a theory of the “subconscious” or “dual conscience,” the view that:

consciousness can be split up, so that certain ideas or other psychical acts may constitute a consciousness apart, which has become detached and estranged. (1912, 263)

Or that:

all the acts and manifestations which I notice in myself and do not know how to link up with the rest of my mental life must be judged as if they belonged to *someone else*: they are to be explained by a *mental life* ascribed to this *other person*. (1915b, 169, emphasis mine)

Freud never gives a single, definitive reason for his rejection of this notion of dual consciousness. However, his interpretation of uncanniness provides a crucial clue. The theory of the subconscious, in contrast to the unconscious, amounts to a rejection of the fundamental uncanniness and ambivalence of the ego. Freud rightly rejects the idea of the subconscious because it uses psychoanalytic theory to protect a fantasy rather than to remove one: the independence of ego from id.

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