

Freud on the Uncanny: A Tale of Two Theories

Mark Windsor

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Abstract. Freud’s famous essay on “The ‘Uncanny’” is often poorly understood. In this paper, I clear up the popular misconception that Freud identifies all uncanny phenomena with the return of repressed infantile complexes by showing that he offers not one but two theories of the uncanny: “return of the repressed,” and another explanation which has to do with the apparent confirmation of “surmounted primitive beliefs.” Of the two, I argue that it is the latter, more often overlooked theory that faces fewer serious objections and carries greater explanatory power in respect of the uncanny.

I

Since its publication nearly a century ago, Freud’s essay on the uncanny has attracted much attention in the humanities and has become a key point of reference for many discussions of literature and art.¹ In spite of this, Freud’s essay is often poorly understood. Freud’s theory of the uncanny is typically referred to in the literature as the “return of the repressed.” Indeed, at one point in the essay, Freud does define the uncanny as “something which is secretly familiar . . . which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (“U,” p. 245). Not long after he offers this definition, however, Freud goes on to distinguish two different etiologies of uncanny experiences—one having to do with repression, and another which has to do with the apparent confirmation of a “primitive” belief in some phenomenon which has been “surmounted.”

“Our conclusion could then be stated thus,” Freud writes, “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (“U,” p. 249).

Thus, contrary to how it is often presented in the literature, Freud does not explain all uncanny phenomena in terms of repressed infantile complexes. Rather, Freud’s account of the uncanny is best thought of as comprising two distinct theories. What I want to show in this paper is that where return of the repressed fails to get us closer to understanding what is distinctive about uncanny phenomena, beyond the broad notion of ambivalence between the familiar and the unfamiliar, Freud’s theory of surmounted primitive beliefs provides a relatively coherent and informative account of what makes certain phenomena be experienced as uncanny.

As many writers have been keen to point out, Freud's essay is beset by ambiguities, contradictions, and elisions.² It is not until quite late on in the essay, in the third and final section, that Freud clearly distinguishes surmounted primitive beliefs from repressed infantile complexes, having for the most part treated the former as a subset of the latter. Given that the distinction between the two is, in Freud's words, "theoretically very important" ("U," p. 248), in order to properly understand Freud's account of the uncanny, it is necessary to apply the distinction retroactively to the material presented in the first two sections of the essay. Once the distinction is applied, it turns out that return of the repressed accounts for only a small minority of the examples that Freud discusses. So wedded was he to his psychoanalytic theory of repression and infantile sexual complexes, that Freud failed to take his own theory of surmounted primitive beliefs seriously enough. Given how important the concept has become for art criticism and theory, it will be worth trying to get clear on what Freud had to say about the uncanny—all the more so because Freud was not too clear about it himself.

In the next section, I present an exposition of Freud's theory of the return of the repressed, using the case study by which he first introduces it in his essay, E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story of "The Sandman." Freud's reading of this story serves both to illustrate return of the repressed, and to highlight its inadequacies in respect of the uncanny. In the third section, I present an exposition of Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs. I show why it is important that it be distinguished from return of the repressed, how it evades many of the problems faced by the latter, and how it carries greater explanatory power in respect of the uncanny. What is remarkable in light of the inadequacies of Freud's interpretation of "The Sandman" is that Freud failed to recognize that his theory of surmounted primitive beliefs offers a much more persuasive explanation of the story's uncanny effect. In the fourth section, I consider some objections to the theory of surmounted primitive beliefs. These pertain to Freud's characterization of infantile and "primitive" beliefs in terms of animism and magic, and of how these beliefs are supposedly passed down through generations. And finally, I suggest how these objections may be responded to, drawing on recent work in psychology.

II

A good way to introduce Freud's theory of the return of the repressed is using the case study by which Freud first introduces the theory in his essay, Hoffmann's story of "The Sandman." Freud's reading of "The Sandman" has become well known, and even achieved a degree of notoriety, in literature studies, which makes it a useful example for me here, because many writers have already drawn attention to its inadequacies.³

"The Sandman" tells the tragic tale of a student, Nathanael, who experiences a strange series of traumatic events, which date back to his childhood—including a mysterious explosion which kills his father, and falling in love with a mechanical doll, Olympia, having mistaken "her" to be human—and who, prompted by these events, suffers recurrent bouts of madness.⁴ These strange events center on the disturbing figure of the eponymous Sandman, a fabled

monster who, it is told, steals away the eyes of naughty children at night, throwing sand in their eyes so that they “jump out of their head all bloody” (Hoffmann, p. 185). Nathanael associates the Sandman with two ominous characters who enter his life at different times—a fearsome lawyer and friend of Nathanael’s father, named Coppelius, whom he encounters as a child, and a sinister-looking peddler of optical devices, going by the name of Coppola, whom he encounters as a student. There is a suggestion in the story, which Freud draws our attention to, that Coppola and Coppelius are one and the same person, and, moreover, that both are somehow manifestations of the fabled Sandman; but it is unclear whether this may just be a product of Nathanael’s disturbed imagination.

Freud asserts that the “unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story” attaches primarily to the figure of the Sandman (“U,” p. 227); but he denies that the effect is caused by uncertainty pertaining to the strange events, or the identities of Coppelius and Coppola. Hoffmann does, Freud acknowledges, create a “kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning” to this effect, but claims that this uncertainty dissipates as the story progresses, as Hoffmann supposedly makes it “quite clear” that Coppelius, Coppola, and the Sandman are in fact identical (“U,” p. 230). Instead, Freud locates the story’s uncanny effect in the threat posed to Nathanael’s eyes, which is a theme that recurs throughout the narrative. As a child, Nathanael spies on his father and Coppelius engaged in some mysterious alchemical operation, and is discovered by Coppelius, who, enraged, threatens to take Nathanael’s eyes: ““Now we’ve got eyes—eyes—a beautiful pair of children’s eyes”” (Hoffmann, p. 188). Years later, when studying abroad, Coppola unexpectedly knocks on Nathanael’s door at his lodgings and offers to sell him, among his other wares, glass eyes: ““I got eyes-a too, fine eyes-a”” (p. 202). It later transpires, in a terrifying moment of revelation, that these are the same “eyes” that were used in the construction of Nathanael’s beloved, the ingenious “living” doll, Olympia.

According to Freud’s analysis, eyes function in the story as a substitute for Nathanael’s (and, presumably, the reader’s) repressed Oedipal fear of castration. Coppelius, Coppola, and the Sandman all represent the “bad” side of Nathanael’s ambivalent attitude towards his father, that is, the father figure who threatens to castrate him. Such, Freud claims, is the primary source of the story’s uncanny effect.

Many of the writers who have discussed Freud’s reading of “The Sandman” have highlighted how, on the one hand, his Oedipal interpretation seems implausible, and how, on the other hand, Freud is too quick to dismiss uncertainty on the reader’s part about the strange, disturbing events—about whether Coppola really is Coppelius in disguise, and whether both really are in any way connected to the fabled Sandman—as the cause of its uncanny effect. But before I pursue these lines of enquiry, let me elaborate the terms of Freud’s return of the repressed at a more general level, and show why I think it falls short as a theory of the uncanny.

According to the theory, the uncanny is the feeling of anxiety that arises when something repressed in the mind is revived by some impression. To understand the theory, then, we need to understand three things: we need to understand the nature of the thing that is repressed, the

nature of repression according to the psychoanalytic model, and the manner in which what is repressed is revived such that it elicits the feeling of the uncanny.

The content of the repression is always that of some infantile sexual complex, specifically, some sexual wish or desire that attends an infantile stage of libidinal development. The best-known example of these complexes is, of course, the Oedipus complex, which, for boys, involves a desire for sexual union with the mother. Because this desire is prohibited, and punishable by castration at the hands of the father, the infant must relinquish the desire to move successfully to the next stage of development. In order to achieve this, and because the desire cannot simply be given up, the desire is repressed. This means that the desire continues to exist in the unconscious mind, but is barred from entering conscious awareness. Insofar as it still exists in the unconscious, the desire continues to exert a pressure for fulfilment, whereupon a compromise is formed. The desire can manifest in conscious awareness and behavior, but only in disguise, thereby achieving a degree of satisfaction for the wish, and maintaining the ego's defense against what is prohibited. The content of the repression is thus transformed through unconscious operations of condensation, displacement, representation, and revision. Condensation reduces the content in scale; displacement transfers the content onto something else through association and symbolism; representation transposes thoughts into images; and revision reorganizes the transformed material, lending it a degree of coherence. Freud elaborates these processes under the rubric of the "dream-work."⁵

The latent (unconscious) content of the repression can be traced from its transformed, manifest (conscious) contents using the psychoanalytic method of interpretation. In "The 'Uncanny,'" for example, Freud claims that the psychoanalytic study of dreams, myths, and fantasies reveals that there is often a symbolic link between the genitals and the eyes, which gives him a clue that the threat posed to Nathanael's eyes is a symbolic displacement of Nathanael's repressed Oedipal fear of castration ("U," p. 231). While Nathanael and the reader are not consciously aware of this link, the threat to the eyes unconsciously activates the anxiety that is tied up with the repressed complex, which manifests in a feeling of uncanniness.

My purpose in rehearsing these fundamentals of psychoanalysis is to highlight just how much one needs to accept to 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 theory 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. It would take me beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the foundation of these premises. Suffice to say that many developmental psychologists and philosophers of mind would no doubt be wary of these commitments. Rather, what I want to show presently is that even if we accept these premises, return of the repressed still falls short as a theory of the uncanny.

Apart from its dubious foundations, the biggest problem faced by the theory is that it 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 which returns to

explain a whole range of psychological and behavioral phenomena, including dreams, errors (or “parapraxes”), jokes, and neurotic symptoms. Return of the repressed is not just Freud’s theory of the uncanny, then; it is the very ur-theory of psychoanalysis.

Given that there is nothing peculiar either about the kinds of complexes, or about the way these complexes are repressed, the revival of which results in a feeling of the uncanny, if anything is going to distinguish uncanny experiences as one set of instances which involve something repressed which returns, this would presumably have to do with the manner in which the repressed complex is revived in the mind. Freud does in fact suggest such a distinguishing feature in his essay when discussing the factor of recurrence or repetition in relation to uncanny phenomena.

Freud writes that “among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny” (“U,” p. 241). Here it seems that Freud allows that any instance of something repressed which recurs will give rise to uncanniness. But surely Freud cannot maintain this. Do not many repressed complexes recur in one fashion or another? Is it not, for example, in the very nature of a neurotic symptom that something repressed recurs?

Elsewhere in the essay, Freud discusses the notion of recurrence in terms of an inner “compulsion to repeat,” referring the reader to another work which he was writing at the time, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”⁶ In this work, Freud postulates for the first time the radical idea of the death drive—an innate, destructive instinct, which is the counterpart of Eros (the life or sexual instinct), which finds behavioral expression in a compulsion to repeat. Freud writes that “whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny” (“U,” p. 238). As Neil Hertz has commented, there is ambiguity in this statement of Freud’s: is it that any instance or token of this compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny, or only when one is reminded of the compulsion itself?⁷ Either way, it is far from clear that an instance of this compulsion to repeat, such as a victim of trauma who repeatedly and unwittingly relives her experience, or being reminded of such compulsion, would be a cause of the uncanny; and then, what exactly is the relation between this compulsion to repeat and repression?

Ultimately, Freud fails to provide an account for what makes some repressed complex that is revived in the mind be a cause of uncanniness rather than some other kind of response or action. As Samuel Weber puts it, “the particular relation between repression, anxiety and the Unheimliche is left open: however interrelated these three are, they are not simply identical.”⁸ Given that the factor of recurrence or repetition fails to distinguish instances of repressed infantile complexes that give rise to the uncanny from those that give rise to other subjective responses or actions, the theory fails to distinguish the factor (or factors) that determine what it is that makes something repressed which returns be experienced as uncanny. Indeed, Freud acknowledges this towards the end of the essay when he writes that “we must be prepared to admit that there are other elements besides those which we have so far laid down as determining the production of uncanny feelings” (“U,” p. 247). In the absence of these

missing elements, Freud's return of the repressed theory of the uncanny is unaccountably the same theory which he uses to explain a whole range of disparate phenomena.⁹

III

If return of the repressed fails to get us closer to understanding the nature of the uncanny, what about the other explanation that Freud offers, surmounted primitive beliefs? According to this theory, we all inherit, both from our individual and collective past, which is to say, both on an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic level, "primitive" beliefs in magical and animistic phenomena, such as that thoughts can have unmediated causal effects on reality, spirits inhabit the world, "life" continues after death, the "dead" can return to the living, and so on. Freud discusses these kinds of phenomena at greater length in his work on "primitive" cultures, *Totem and Taboo*.¹⁰ In this work, Freud defines animism as "the doctrine of spiritual beings" (*TT*, pp. 87–88), and refers to magic as a practice based on the principle of the "omnipotence of thoughts" (p. 99).

"Nowadays," Freud writes, "we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something *actually happens* in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny ("U," pp. 247–48).

Once the distinction between uncanny phenomena that stem from repressed infantile complexes and those that stem from surmounted primitive beliefs is applied, it turns out that only a small minority of those that Freud discusses in his essay falls into the former category. Apart from the threat to the eyes posed by the Sandman, there are only two kinds of uncanny phenomena that Freud unambiguously attributes to repressed infantile complexes: dismembered body parts, such as disembodied hands, which also function as substitutes for the castration complex, and the fear of being buried alive, which activates the repressed fantasy of "intra-uterine existence" ("U," p. 244).

The theory of surmounted primitive beliefs, on the other hand, accounts for the bulk of the uncanny phenomena that Freud identifies. These phenomena include ghosts, which appear to confirm "the doctrine of spiritual beings"; the double or the doppelganger, which Freud relates to belief in the immaterial soul; inanimate objects, such as dolls, automata, and waxworks, which appear to be alive; coincidences, which can create the impression of fateful intervention; magical powers, such as the evil eye; and apparent psychical phenomena, such as telepathy, precognition, and wish fulfilments, which appear to confirm belief in the "omnipotence of thoughts."

Surmounted primitive beliefs accord to the same basic psychological structure as repressed complexes, of something that exists in the mind, "known of old and long familiar," but in a latent form, and hence strange and unfamiliar, the revival of which results in the uncanny ("U," p. 220). But there are a number of crucial differences between repressed complexes and surmounted beliefs. To start with, 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. As Freud writes, to speak of “repression” in this context is to extend the term “beyond its legitimate meaning” (“U,” p. 249).

Unlike repressed complexes, primitive beliefs are tied up with understanding of how the world works—of what does or does not exist in reality. For repressed complexes to be activated, all that is required is that some image, motif, or idea activates in the unconscious the latent thought content of the repressed complex; it does not matter how or in what context this activation occurs, merely the activation of the thought content is enough. In this case, “the question of material reality does not arise” (“U,” p. 249). Whereas, for surmounted primitive beliefs to have an uncanny effect, that which seems to confirm “the old, discarded beliefs” must be experienced as actually happening. Here, in contrast, the stimulus must have some claim to truth or reality; the mere thought of something, say, a ghost, will not be enough. As Freud puts it: “The whole thing is purely an affair of ‘reality-testing,’ a question of the material reality of the phenomena” (p. 248). Moreover, not everyone is equally susceptible to surmounted primitive beliefs. On the one hand, some people must simply still hold “primitive” beliefs, which is to say, have never surmounted those beliefs in the first place. On the other hand, “anyone who has completely rid himself of animistic beliefs,” Freud writes, “will be insensible to this type of the uncanny” (p. 248).

These key differences between surmounted beliefs and repressed complexes entail a number of benefits for the former over the latter as a theory of the uncanny.

The theory of surmounted primitive beliefs does not require that one subscribe to a developmental account of universal infantile sexual complexes, or a theory of mind which accommodates the unconscious processes of the dream-work through which these complexes may be repressed. One may yet have reasonable doubts about the developmental account of “primitive” beliefs which the theory postulates; but I do not think this developmental account is so hard to swallow as that of infantile sexual complexes. I will discuss these problematic aspects of surmounted primitive beliefs, and suggest how these problems may best be responded to, in the next section.

Because the content is not transformed through unconscious processes, surmounted primitive beliefs pertain directly to uncanny phenomena, and not through some speculative chain of association which relies on the epistemically-tenuous hermeneutical practice of the analyst. On this model, a ghost means a ghost, not a penis. Whereas, owing to the contingency of the process of repression, presumably almost anything can become an object of a repressed infantile complex.

When considering the kinds of phenomena that we tend to experience as uncanny, that the object of uncanny feelings should be so radically contingent on the processes of the dream-work strains credibility. Psychoanalysis tells us that a plethora of symbols often function as

substitutes for the male genitals—from umbrellas and trees, to all kinds of weapon, to taps and fountains, pens, hammers, and other instruments, to balloons and flying-machines, to reptiles and fish, to cloaks and hats.¹¹ Presumably, all of these symbols would, at least to some degree, be apt to unconsciously activate the repressed Oedipal dread of castration. So why do we not associate any of these motifs with the uncanny? Moreover, Freud comments that uncanny feelings that result from repressed complexes occur only rarely in real life, and that most real life uncanny experiences derive from the apparent confirmation of surmounted primitive beliefs (“U,” p. 248). Why this should be the case, however, Freud never explains, and one gets the sense he may be covering his tracks.

Perhaps most importantly, return of the repressed does not tell us anything of what is distinctive about uncanny objects, whereas surmounted primitive beliefs fit much more closely the phenomena which the theory seeks to explain, given that we associate the uncanny with the supernatural and the paranormal. It offers a much richer explanation for what makes something be experienced as uncanny, from the first-person point of view. It offers an explanation for why, for example, the same phenomenon may be uncanny to one person but not to another, depending on their beliefs about what is possible. The same ghost-like apparition that is uncanny to me may not be to an avid ghost-hunter, say. It also offers an explanation for why the same phenomenon may be uncanny in one context but not another, depending on whether it brings about the necessary “conflict of judgement as to whether things which have been ‘surmounted’ and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible” (“U,” p. 250). The same apparent act of telepathy that one finds uncanny in real life one may not find uncanny in the context of, say, a magic show.

Moreover, this uncertainty about what is real that is necessary to experience something as uncanny according to the theory of surmounted primitive beliefs predicts an interesting and important feature of the uncanny in fiction. Fictional worlds, such as fairy tales, that openly adopt an animistic worldview generally preclude uncanny effects because they preclude the necessary conflict of judgement about what is real in the story; we simply take it for granted that ghosts and magic do exist in these fictional worlds. For the apparent confirmation of surmounted primitive beliefs to have an uncanny effect in fiction, the fictional world must be one of “material reality” (“U,” p. 250): the reader must imaginatively engage with the fictional world as if it were bound by the same natural laws as the real world.

These remarks of Freud’s on the uncanny in fiction have found endorsement even with those working outside of the psychoanalytic tradition. The philosopher Greg Currie and psychiatrist Jon Jureidini write that Freud’s “remarks about the fictional case seem right; things that are uncanny relative to one set of background assumptions need not be so, relative to another.”¹² Although Currie and Jureidini are keen to distance themselves from Freud’s return of the repressed, what they fail to acknowledge is that these comments of Freud’s are not restricted to the fictional case; rather, they are an application of his theory of surmounted primitive beliefs to the fictional case.

What is remarkable in light of the inadequacies of his reading of “The Sandman” is that Freud failed to recognize that his own theory of surmounted primitive beliefs provides a

framework through which the uncanny effect of the story may have been so much better understood. In a broad sense, the uncanniness of the story can be understood in terms of a blurring of the distinction between reality and imagination. It is Nathanael's apparent "over-accentuation of psychical reality" ("U," p. 244)—as Freud might have put it—and concomitant madness that underpins the uncanny nightmarish quality of the narrative. More specifically, the dubious appearance of the Sandman in the form of Coppelius and Coppola appears to confirm the surmounted childhood belief in the existence of such fabled monsters.

In his reading of "The Sandman," Freud refers to another work on the uncanny, an essay by the German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch. Jentsch's central thesis is that the uncanny involves an experience of "psychical uncertainty."¹³ Freud goes to some length in his essay to provide a synopsis of "The Sandman" which supposedly makes it clear "that Jentsch's point about intellectual uncertainty has nothing to do with the effect" ("U," p. 230). Freud's eagerness to divest Jentsch's idea about psychical uncertainty gives the lie to his Oedipal interpretation. Not only does return of the repressed fail to provide a convincing account of the story, but according to Freud's own theory of surmounted primitive beliefs, uncertainty about what is real is a necessary component of what it means to experience something as uncanny. Interpreted on this model, the threat posed to the eyes in "The Sandman" does carry an important symbolic meaning. The threat posed to Nathanael's eyes by the Sandman and his dubious human avatars represents Nathanael's loss of connection to reality and concomitant descent into madness—the very locus of the story's uncanny effect.

Compared to his theory of repressed infantile complexes, which, even on his own account, serves a very limited application, Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs provides a relatively coherent and compelling account of the uncanny. It has not been my aim in this section to defend the theory wholesale, however. Rather, my aim has been to show that, compared to the return of the repressed, surmounted primitive beliefs faces fewer serious objections and carries greater explanatory power in respect of the uncanny. I commented above that one may reasonably have doubts about the developmental commitments of the theory. I now want to look at these more closely, and see how far if it may be possible to defend Freud's account.

IV

To understand what may be problematic about Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs, we need to examine what exactly Freud means when he talks about "primitive" beliefs, and what exactly he means when he says that such beliefs have been "surmounted."

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes how humankind goes through three broad phases of intellectual development: animism, religion, and science (*TT*, p. 102). "Primitive" beliefs derive from the earliest stage of development, animism. Animism, in this broad sense, is used to refer to the total belief system or worldview of "primitive" peoples. This belief system includes belief in animism in a narrower sense, which Freud defines as "the doctrine of spiritual beings" (p. 88); animatism, which he defines as "the doctrine of the universality of

life,” the idea that all objects possess a spirit or soul (p. 107); and magic, which is a technique based on the principle of the “omnipotence of thoughts,” whereby laws that govern mental phenomena are taken to apply to the material realm (p. 106). In general, it can be said that animism as a worldview originates from the overvaluation of psychical reality over material reality; from the assumption that the material world operates in the same way that humans do.

According to an application of the biological theory of “recapitulation,” Freud believed that the development of the individual (ontogeny) mirrors the development of the species (phylogeny), as expressed by the nineteenth-century biologist Ernst Haeckel’s maxim, “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.”¹⁴ Thus, on Freud’s account, “primitive” beliefs in the existence of spirits and the omnipotence of thoughts belong both to “the prehistory of the individual and of the race,” where the former recapitulates the latter (“U,” p. 245). There is also a suggestion here in Freud’s notion of how beliefs are passed down through generations of an application of the evolutionary theory of Lamarck, which posits the inheritance of acquired traits.¹⁵

Second, what, according to Freud, does it mean to have “surmounted” such beliefs? Freud is not entirely clear on this in “The ‘Uncanny,’” but he is clear that “surmounted” should not be equated with “repressed.” The content of a surmounted belief is not transformed through the unconscious psychodynamic operations of the dream-work, and thereby made unavailable to consciousness; rather, it is just that the subject’s attitude to the content changes, more or less, from one of belief to disbelief.

In contrast to the process of repressing some ideational content, the process of surmounting a belief is relatively easy to accommodate in terms of theory of mind, for it does not require the same special, unconscious operations of the dream-work as repression does. Surmounted beliefs can be accommodated, to use more current terminology, as something like partial dispositional beliefs. For example, I do not believe in ghosts, but I have the disposition to entertain the existence of ghosts if I see a ghost-like apparition floating down the corridor one night. The problematic aspects of surmounted primitive beliefs, then, pertain to Freud’s characterization of “primitive” beliefs in terms of animism and magic, and of how these beliefs are supposedly passed down from earlier stages of development to later ones, both on a phylogenetic and an ontogenetic level.

First, is Freud right to characterize the beliefs of traditional peoples in terms of animism and magic? In his characterization of “primitive” beliefs, Freud draws on the work of early anthropologists, notably Edward Tylor and James Frazer, who saw magical practices as founded on false, quasi-scientific beliefs about how the world works.¹⁶ Since then, a number of prominent thinkers have issued caution in inferring beliefs about how the world works from such practices. Wittgenstein succinctly makes the point in his commentary on Frazer’s magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*, when he writes that: “The same savage who stabs the picture of his enemy, apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his arrows skilfully and not in effigy.”¹⁷ Thus, we should be wary about attributing animistic beliefs to traditional peoples.

Second, is Freud right to characterize infantile beliefs in terms of animism and magic? According to one traditional view in psychology, notably elaborated by Jean Piaget, children are prone to magical thinking, to see inanimate objects as animate beings, and are unable to properly distinguish between reality and make-believe.¹⁸ More recent empirical work has cast doubt on Piaget's view, however. Even children as young as three can reliably distinguish ghosts, witches, and monsters as make-believe, and things like balloons, cups, and scissors as real.¹⁹ Thus, we should also be wary of attributing animistic beliefs to children.

Third, we should also be wary of the mechanisms that Freud postulated by which "primitive" beliefs are passed down through generations. Both the biological theory of recapitulation and the evolutionary theory of Lamarck have been largely discredited; and even if this were not the case, it is not clear that Freud is justified in applying these theories to the psychological realm.

The picture starts to look bleak for surmounted primitive beliefs. But all is not lost. There are ways that one can defend or else elaborate Freud's theory against these challenges.

For a start, just on a circumstantial level, the prevalence of belief in the existence of supernatural phenomena in contemporary Western society suggests, as Freud puts it, that such beliefs "are in a state of having been (to a greater or lesser extent) surmounted" ("U," p. 249). Whatever mechanisms Freud postulated that "primitive" beliefs are inherited or recapitulated (which mechanisms he does not make clear in "The 'Uncanny'"), it is evident that culture operates as a powerful force for the transmission of ideas, and that from major world religions to popular entertainments, supernatural phenomena are deeply embedded in our society and culture.

More substantially, work in developmental psychology can be used to support the idea that children do hold an animistic view of the world which is later surmounted. Even though young children can reliably distinguish between fantasy and reality, it is also true to an extent that children do tend to believe in magic, to see inanimate objects as animate beings, and to confuse reality and make-believe. When asked to imagine a creature in a box, many four- and six-year-olds admitted, after being left alone with the box for a couple of minutes, that they wondered whether there really was a creature inside. Another study showed that many four-year-olds say that tulips can feel happy and feel pain.²⁰

The psychologist Bruce Hood has developed an account which seeks to explain the widespread existence of belief in supernatural phenomena by showing how as children we intuitively construct naïve models of understanding the world which dispose us to magical and animistic beliefs.²¹ For example, children intuitively think of people in terms of a physical body and an immaterial mind, which may dispose us to belief in animism in the narrow sense, the doctrine of spiritual beings.²² Humans have a tendency to attribute mental states to inanimate objects, which may dispose us to belief in animatism, the principle of the universality of life.²³ Moreover, the psychologist Paul Rozin and his colleagues have done much work in recent years on manifestations of magical thinking in educated, adult Westerners. Rozin's and his colleagues' work suggests that we are all susceptible to magical

thinking. We respond emotionally to objects as if they carried imperceptible essences, either of that which they resemble or have come into contact with: we feel uncomfortable throwing darts at images of loved ones; we are reluctant to wear a serial killer's jumper.²⁴

Thus, even though Freud's developmental account of primitive beliefs—wrought as it is with dubious biological, evolutionary, anthropological, and developmental theory—faces some significant problems as it stands, it may be possible to salvage the insights that it has to offer on the uncanny by adapting these to more credible frameworks. Whether or not one calls animistic and magical beliefs “primitive” or “surmounted,” it can at least be said that, both on a collective and an individual level, we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, disposed to entertain these beliefs—that these beliefs “exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation” (“U,” p. 247).

V

Regardless of one's views about psychoanalysis, it is clear that of the two theories of the uncanny that Freud offers, surmounted primitive beliefs provides a much richer and more compelling explanation for the phenomena at stake. When it comes to the uncanny, return of the repressed is rather like a chimera: it appears substantial enough from a distance, but the closer you get to it, the less tangible it becomes. In this respect, Freud's reading of “The Sandman” is symptomatic. Surmounted primitive beliefs, on the other hand, offers a plausible explanation for why we experience certain phenomena as uncanny: because they appear to confirm the existence of the supernatural. The uncanny is the disturbing moment of uncertainty during which the impossible seems to be actually happening.

One wonders how far it may be possible to take Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs. Can it, for example, provide the means for a robust way of defining the uncanny, a task that many writers on the topic have claimed cannot be done? I will leave this question for another inquiry. In any case, it seems to me that Freud came a lot closer to answering that question than a lot of writers have given him credit for.

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¹ Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 17: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. J. Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 217–52; hereafter abbreviated “U.”

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- ² For a classic deconstruction of Freud's essay, see Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The 'Uncanny')," trans. R. Denomé, *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 525–645.
- ³ See Adam Bresnick, "Prosopoetic Compulsion: Reading the Uncanny in Freud and Hoffmann," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 3 (1996): 114–32; Neil Hertz, "Freud and the Sandman," in *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 97–121; Sarah Kofman, "The Double is/and the Devil: The Uncanniness of *The Sandman (Der Sandmann)*," in *Freud and Fiction*, trans. S. Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 119–62; Samuel Weber, "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," *MLN* 88 (1973): 1102–33.
- ⁴ E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Sand-Man," in *The Best Tales of Hoffmann*, ed. E. F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), pp. 183–214; hereafter abbreviated Hoffmann.
- ⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 204–18.
- ⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 269–38.
- ⁷ Hertz, "Freud and the Sandman," pp. 101–02.
- ⁸ Weber, "The Sideshow": 1109.
- ⁹ Noël Carroll makes this point about Freud's theory in his "Horror and Humor," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57 (1999): 146; but Carroll also makes the common mistake of presenting Freud's account of the uncanny solely in terms of repression.
- ¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey (London: Routledge, 2001); hereafter abbreviated *TT*.
- ¹¹ Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 188–89.
- ¹² Greg Currie and Jon Jureidini, "Art and Delusion," *The Monist* 86 (2003): 560.
- ¹³ Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)," trans. R. Sellars, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2 (1997): 7–16.
- ¹⁴ See Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).
- ¹⁵ See Frank Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁶ Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1871). James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).
- ¹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, ed. J. Klagg and A. Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 125.
- ¹⁸ Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, trans. J. Tomlinson and A. Tomlinson (London: Granada, 1973).
- ¹⁹ Paul Harris et al., "Monsters, ghosts and witches: Testing the limits of the fantasy-reality distinction in young children," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 9 (1991): 105–23.
- ²⁰ Harris et al., "Monsters, ghosts and witches". John Coley, "Emerging differentiation of folkbiology and folkpsychology: attributions of biological and psychological properties to living things," *Child Development* 66 (1995): 1856–74.
- ²¹ Bruce Hood, *Supersense: From Superstition to Religion – The Brain Science of Belief* (London: Constable, 2009).
- ²² Henry M. Wellman, *The Child's Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 50.
- ²³ One classic experiment showed how people tend to describe the moment of abstract geometric shapes on a screen by attributing mental states to them. Fritz Heider and Marianne

Simmel, "An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior," *American Journal of Psychology*, 57 (1944): 243–59.

²⁴ Paul Rozin, Linda Millman, and Carol Nemeroff, "Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50 (1986): 701–12.