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*Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and the Uncanny*

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## CHAPTER TWO

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# The Eyes of the Other

## *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and the Uncanny*

BEN MOORE

### THE EYES OF THE OTHER: *FRANKENSTEIN* AND THE UNCANNY

Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919) is one of the most important meeting points between literature and psychoanalysis. From the beginning, the uncanny is for Freud an aesthetic and literary question more than a psychoanalytic one: "It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics . . . he works in other strata of mental life" (*SE* 17: 218) he writes. This improper subject, one which marks a "crisis of the proper" (Royle: 1), brings psychoanalysis together with its literary "other," in Shoshana Felman's sense that "literature *in* psychoanalysis functions precisely as its '*unthought*': as the condition of possibility *and* the self-subversive blind spot of psychoanalytical *thought*" (10). Felman's point is not just that psychoanalysis has from the start been involved with literature, but that literature is inside psychoanalysis in ways that psychoanalysis cannot fully grasp. Psychoanalysis can certainly turn its attention to literature, as Freud does with E.T.A. Hoffmann in *The Uncanny*, but more fundamentally, literary forms of thinking, which are inherently metaphorical, multiple and ambiguous, shape the way psychoanalysis reads its subjects, their dreams, anxieties and desires. Yet despite this, literature remains in some way resistant to psychoanalysis, never wholly reducible to its terms.

One name we can give to this dynamic between literature and psychoanalysis, in which each is at once familiar and strange to the other, is the uncanny. Indeed, it is in the encounter between psychoanalysis and literature, and the related question of what *cannot be worked through* by means of psychoanalysis, that Freud's sense of the uncanny seems to reside. As later commentators have pointed out, it is precisely his final inability to pin down the meaning and origins of the uncanny that makes *The Uncanny* one of Freud's most (perhaps unintentionally) speculative and literary essays.

### READING THE UNCANNY

The aim of the essay, according to Freud, is to bring psychoanalysis to bear upon the realm of aesthetics by attempting to explain the subclass of frightening phenomena known as the *unheimlich*, literally the unhomely. He is responding to a 1906 paper by Ernst Jentsch, "*Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen*" ("On the Psychology of the Uncanny"), which links this feeling to a confusion

between the living and inanimate. Freud's discussion proceeds by way of an etymology of the word *unheimlich*, then a reading of Hoffmann's "The Sand-Man" (1816), which leads to an association with the castration complex, and then to a discussion of ego-disturbance and the theme of the double, drawing on Otto Rank's *Der Doppelgänger* (1914). Freud comes eventually to a theory of the uncanny which sees it as the return of the repressed from early infancy (*SE* 17: 241), but then is forced to admit that this definition does not explain all uncanny instances, especially in literature (*SE* 17: 245), bringing him back round to Jentsch's claims, earlier rejected. Finally, he suggests that maintaining a distinction between fiction and real life might be able to resolve this difficulty.

Freud's initial definition of the uncanny turns on what is in effect a literary observation: the simultaneous opposition and coincidence of the German terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Freud explains that "The German word '*unheimlich*' is obviously the opposite of '*heimlich*' ['homely'], '*heimisch*' ['native']—the opposite of what is familiar" (*SE* 17 219), but then observes that "among its different shades of meaning the word '*heimlich*' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, '*unheimlich*'. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*" (*SE* 17: 223). This gives us one of the simplest definitions of the uncanny: the combination of the familiar (homely) and the unfamiliar (unhomely). Freud here echoes Samuel Johnson's claim about "the two most engaging powers of an author" (§: 338); that "new things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new" (§: 338). In Jacques Derrida's "rereading" (220, n.32) of Freud's essay in "The Double Session" (1970), he argues that words like hymen, *pharmakon*, *supplément* and *différance*, to which we can add uncanny and *unheimlich*, are self-contradictory in ways that make them irreducibly undecidable. While not identical to one another, these terms all "mark the spots of what can never be mediated, mastered, sublated, or dialecticized through any *Erinnerung* or *Aufhebung*" (221). The uncanny in this sense is inherently double, it belongs "both to consciousness and to the unconscious" (221). It relies on the conscious recognition of something, but what exactly this is, or why it is disturbing, remains unknown. The uncanny is thus a composite that cuts across the psychic apparatus of the subject, and across language, revealing both our lack of knowledge of ourselves and language's inability to stabilize signification.

It is therefore appropriate that Freud's definition of the uncanny is itself immediately doubled, when he follows the familiar/unfamiliar dyad with Schelling's comment that "everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (*SE* 17: 224). One definition is put in doubt by another. This contradiction is later apparently reconciled through the concept of the return of the repressed, in which "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (*SE* 17: 240) recurs in an unfamiliar way. In a Derridean manner, though, the satisfaction that seems to be offered by this reconciliation, which emerges through an analytic reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's strange Romantic short story "The Sand-Man," is undone in the latter part of the essay, where we find evidence of Freud's "haunting suspicion that the uncanny is precisely that which evades textual archaeology" (Møller: 98). As Lis Møller observes, the essay's insights result less from a dominance of psychoanalysis over literature than from "the space of encounter of two voices, psychoanalysis and literature" (98). Similarly for Hélène Cixous, the unmasterable presence of the literary is what makes the essay "less a discourse than a strange theoretical novel" (525). This is despite the fact that Freud's reading of Hoffmann's tale as an allegory for castration anxiety is itself a castrative one, in which the significance of Olympia, the mechanical woman loved by the protagonist Nathaniel, is denied, meaning that "one half of the text is eliminated" (535). What Freud's reading of Hoffmann

represses within literature is therefore its polyvalent meaning, and in a related way the question of the woman who exceeds an Oedipal reading (Cixous: 538).

To downplay Olympia is to risk underestimating the conjunction between the living and the inanimate in Hoffmann, and hence the centrality of this conjunction to the uncanny. By contrast, adaptations of Offenbach's opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (1881), based partly on "The Sand-Man," have emphasized the way "epileptic fits and manifestations of insanity reveal automatic, mechanical processes working within the body" (Tambling: 28). To perceive the mechanical not as being outside the subject, but as something internal to it, which makes it strange to itself, is one of the uncanny lessons of Hoffmann's text. The uncanny in this sense is a modern phenomenon, arising when the mechanical has become a feature of everyday life. Marx's account of modern capitalism, for instance, registers both the mechanization of the life of the worker and the alienation of the worker's labour power in the commodity, an inanimate object that seems to have a life of its own. In describing the "enigmatical character" (43) of both worker and commodity, Marx shows us the uncanny structure of capitalist society.

From another angle, Freud's analysis of "The Sand-Man" can be countered by Baudelaire's reading of Hoffmann as a proponent of the grotesque or "absolute" (157) comic, rather than the simpler "significative" (157) comic. For Baudelaire, Hoffmann "knows what he is doing; but he also knows that the essence of this type of the comic is that it should appear to be unaware of itself" (165). This makes Hoffmann's text both knowing and unknowing, conscious and unconscious, recalling Derrida on self-contradiction. There is in this reading no one-to-one correspondence between text and meaning, which is why Freud's reading of the story as everywhere signifying castration anxiety is insufficient. Rather, the "absolute comic" makes *everything* grotesque by insisting on a principle of non-identity. It is less about symbolically unfolding the repercussions of a single, albeit powerful, anxiety than about presenting a world where anxiety is distributed and referentiality destabilized. This is symbolized in the culmination of the story, when Nathaniel's eyes "beg[i]n to roll" (123) as madness takes him over, and almost his last words are "Spin, spin, circle of fire!" (124). This rolling and spinning is the action of Hoffmann's text as well as Nathaniel's body, both of which move in a way that is at once grotesque, mechanical and repetitive, and which either is or appears to be outside conscious control.

It is for such reasons that Freud's repression of literary multiplicity cannot stand: "We must be prepared to admit," he says, "that there are other elements besides those which we have so far laid down as determining the production of uncanny feelings" (*SE* 17: 246). It is at this point that Freud attempts to separate "the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about" (*SE* 17: 246); that is, to separate life and literature, and in doing so to stabilize the properly psychoanalytic uncanny while allowing its literary counterpart to remain unstable and unpredictable. But, as Cixous points out, literature always speaks back to real life, and this distinction cannot be maintained. As she puts it, "any analysis of the *Unheimliche* is in itself an *Un*, a mark of repression and the dangerous vibration of the *Heimliche*" (545). Nicholas Royle similarly remarks that Freud's essay is itself uncanny because it shows us "things about psychoanalysis that perhaps ought to have remained hidden and secret" (15), although we might equally say that the willingness of psychoanalysis to undergo self-interrogation is deeply consistent with its Copernican decentring of the ego.

A different approach to reading the uncanny is taken by Anneleen Masschelein, who argues that it is really a late-twentieth century concept, for which Freud is "the founder of discourse" (4) in a

Foucauldian sense (Foucault: 217). In this reading, Derrida, Todorov and Cixous are the key figures, who “push the uncanny to the fore as a concept and paved the way for its canonization” (Masschelein: 15). For Masschelein, the uncanny is an “unconcept,” one which is “on the verge of no longer being a concept, of dissipating again into chaos or into *doxa* and emerging from it in unexpected ways” (11). Alongside Royle and Gregory Kohon, discussed below, Masschelein’s book is a third significant account of the topic within the last two decades, though perhaps surprisingly it does not dwell on Jacques Lacan’s engagement with the uncanny in Seminar X (1962–63), which as I argue in the following section, is also a vital coordinate in the history of the uncanny.

## READING LITERATURE THROUGH THE UNCANNY

In the paragraphs that follow, I utilize some of Kohon and Lacan’s observations to move away from Freud’s original essay and towards a consideration of how we might draw on the uncanny in our literary readings. What, for instance, does an uncanny reading of literature look like, and how might reading through the uncanny reshape our understanding of literature? How, too, might the uncanny help us avoid the temptation to psychoanalyse characters as if they are people, to put “Hamlet on the couch” (95) as Crichtley and Webster put it? Can the uncanniness of literature instead help us “put psychoanalysis on the couch and to the test” (95)? While I start with *Hamlet* (1609), my reading leads towards *Frankenstein* (1818/1831), described by Mladen Dolar, in one of the most insightful essays on the uncanny, as “perhaps the best example” (1991: 16) of the historical emergence of the uncanny out of the Enlightenment, as a symptom of the dawning of modernity.

For Kohon, all genuine aesthetic experience is uncanny. The subject who encounters an artwork or literary text should:

be ready and willing to undergo some form of depersonalisation, to experience some sense of unreality; the subject must risk, however briefly, losing the barriers that keep the self safe and sound. This may involve anxiety, the fear of which may inhibit the capacity for aesthetic experience; trepidation and apprehension do away with joy. The subject might suffer a genuine estrangement from the self.

— 5

This account of the aesthetic draws on Paul Federn’s 1932 concept of estrangement as the creation of a split between participating self and observing self, in which the movement between familiarity and strangeness generates an uncanny surplus of anxiety (Kohon: 9). Lacan refers to Federn on estrangement (using the English term) in his reading of *Hamlet*, when discussing “those periods of irruption, of subjective disorganization which occur when something in the fantasy wavers and makes the components of the fantasy appear” (“Desire” 22). In such an experience, “the imaginary limits between subject and object change, lead[ing] us to what is called in the strict sense the fantastic dimension [*le fantastique*]” (22). Lacan’s use of *le fantastique* to describe the uncanny disorganization of the subject anticipates Todorov, for whom the fantastic is a literary genre defined by uncertainty: “In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (25). This leads to uncertainty about whether the event is an illusion or a reality, and the fantastic “occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (25). For Todorov, such

uncertainty is usually settled by either a logical explanation of the phenomena or an indication that the laws of nature are suspended. Somewhat confusingly, Todorov uses “uncanny” to refer to the former of these outcomes (the latter being the “marvellous”), but it is really the suspension of certainty *within* the fantastic that comes closest to Freud’s version of the uncanny, even though Freud is at first dissatisfied with Jentsch’s explanation of the uncanny as derived from “intellectual uncertainty” (SE 17: 220).

For Lacan, however, the uncanny is not associated primarily with uncertainty about the line between reality and fantasy, or with material erupting from the unconscious, but with the breakdown of fantasy for the subject. In Lacan’s reading of *Hamlet*, it is Hamlet’s encounter with the ghost of his father (in Act I, Scenes IV and V) that punctures Hamlet’s fantasy, through the revelation that “The serpent that did sting thy father’s life/Now wears his crown” (I.V.46–47), meaning that his uncle has usurped both the throne and Hamlet’s place in the Oedipal triangle by killing Hamlet’s father and marrying his mother. Hamlet now has to take up a “new and henceforth difficult identification” (“Desire” 21), which we might take to be that with his murdered father, or with his own Oedipal desires, uncannily embodied by his uncle; but in doing so, Ophelia is rendered “completely null and dissolved as a love object” (“Desire” 22). Lacan’s reading shows that the fantasy destroyed here is not something fantastical or magical, but precisely the illusion of a “normal” life; the fantasy that Hamlet can marry Ophelia and that she can fulfil his desires. As Dolar glosses Lacan, the uncanny is “the irruption of the real into ‘homely’, commonly accepted reality” (1991: 6), which shatters “well-known divisions” (6). In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan explains that subjectification always leaves behind a “remainder” (S10: 161) or “lost object” (S10: 161) in the real, which Lacan designates the *objet a*. Anxiety arises when the real confronts us in one form or another of this lost object, revealing our incompleteness as subjects. To adapt a phrase from Fredric Jameson, the real is what hurts. It shocks or jolts us, and disrupts the smooth functioning of the social worlds we inhabit, or rather shows that such smooth functioning was always a fantasy. Lacan’s most dramatic image of this experience comes via Oedipus, whose plight represents “the impossible sight that threatens you, of your own eyes lying on the ground” (S10: 162). Something similar occurs in Hoffmann, of whom Todorov observes that “symbols of indirect, distorted, subverted vision” (122) are central not just because they offer false vision, but because they are also paradoxically “a quintessence of sight” (123). For Hamlet, then, as later for Victor Frankenstein, it is not the case of a lack of reality, but of too much of it.

The loss of self that Hamlet experiences is, following Kohon’s logic, an extreme version of what we must all risk in the aesthetic encounter. The subject who lets go temporarily of secure self-knowledge opens themselves up to uncanny experiences, a condition in which unexpected connections can be formed involuntarily when reading literature, watching films or viewing artworks. To enter this subject position is to align oneself with the hysteric, who suffers “*mainly from reminiscences*” (SE 1: 7) in Freud and Breuer’s famous phrase, since aesthetic objects often activate memories and give them new meaning, as a form of *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred reaction (Kohon: 14). This is the topic of Freud’s first extended literary reading, in “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*” (1907), about the 1902 novel inspired by a bas-relief from the Vatican Museum. In the story a young archaeologist named Norbert Hanold becomes obsessed with the statue of a walking girl named Gradiva, which he associates with Pompeii. A living girl whom Norbert takes, in an apparently delusional manner, to be Gradiva turns out to be Zoe Bertgang, a childhood friend. In Freud’s analysis, “the discovery dawns upon us that the young archaeologist’s phantasies about his



Gradiva may have been an echo of his forgotten childhood memories” (SE 9: 31). Freud even compares Zoe’s actions, as she seeks to bring to light Norbert’s unconscious repressed memories, to the analytic practice introduced by him and Breuer in 1895 (SE 9: 89). With its trope of the man who confuses an artificial girl for a living one, and the topic of repressed childhood memories with a sexual content, *Gradiva* is strikingly similar to “The Sand-Man,” although it makes the theme of aesthetic encounter more prominent. Jensen in fact uses the term uncanny/*unheimlich* in the story, referring to Norbert’s “strangely uncanny horror of antique collections” (27) in Rome.

An extension of the ideas Freud is working through in the *Gradiva* essay is the possibility that the uncanny is an early developmental stage which is reactivated by any new uncanny experience, whether in everyday life or in literature. Lacan’s mirror stage, in which the child “assumes [*assume*] an image” of himself as “ideal-I” (*Écrits*: 76) through identification with what is outside himself, and therefore turns the unfamiliar (the image) into the familiar (the self), at the cost of losing whatever does not fit with that image (which Lacan variously calls the object, the Thing, the real, or the *objet a*) would be one reading of this phase. Michel de M’Uzan, an influence on Kohon, argues more directly that:

The uncanny commemorates and celebrates a crucial phase in the development of psychic functioning, *a moment when the uncanny finds its primordial basis*, a moment when the indeterminate nature of identity, the daughter of the naturally uncertain character of the frontiers of being, projects into the future an occasional return, a return that is even more insistent than one would imagine it to be, in the form of troubling or disturbing experiences of uncanniness.

— 143

For de M’Uzan, sexual drives, which are disruptive, are always in contest with the “*vital-identitital*” (144) order, the self-preservative, non-instinctual dimension of identity. The uncanny lies at the intersection of these two orders. This conflict is usually stable in adulthood, but uncanny phenomena reactivate the primordial instability between the two. This conflict can alternatively be described as that between life (self-preservation, the pleasure principle, the I which forms in the mirror stage) and death (*jouissance*, the death drive, the lack in the subject which the *objet a* embodies).

A text like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) dramatizes this contest. Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella follows Mr Utterson’s attempts to uncover the mystery of Mr Hyde, a monstrous figure associated with violent and debauched behaviour, who seems to have a powerful hold over the respectable Dr Jekyll. It eventually turns out that Hyde is a repressed side of Jekyll, split off from him by a chemical experiment, so that the two men now inhabit one body. If Jekyll stands on the side of life, representing self-preservation and “genial respectability” (56), Hyde represents both *jouissance* (“leaping pulses and secret pleasures” [60]) and dead matter (“the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices . . . the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned” [65]). Such a reading goes further than taking Hyde as the pleasure principle and Jekyll as the reality principle that limits and defers its goals, which might at first seem to explain the text. If we instead read Hyde as the “beyond” of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), this helps to unravel one of the more uncanny features of the novella: the fact that Hyde is not perceived as lacking or incomplete but as being in some undefinable way *too much*. Early in the narrative, he exceeds Mr Enfield’s capacity for description: “He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity,

although I couldn't specify the point. He's an extraordinary looking man, and yet I really can name nothing out of the way" (9). As Utterson, the detective figure of the story, puts it, "There must be something else . . . There *is* something else, if I could find a name for it" (16). This unnameable something is not sufficiently explained by Henry Jekyll's suggestion that Hyde is repulsive because "alone in the ranks of mankind, he was pure evil" (55). Rather, Hyde should be understood as a figure for what identity cannot encompass, but which nonetheless lies within it. He is the excess *jouissance* that is both desired and repressed, and which points the way towards the abolition of the subject: "man will ultimately be known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens," [53] Jekyll predicts.

In the manner of the abject for Kristeva, such a figure simultaneously provokes fascinated attraction (Utterson is obsessed with discovering the truth about him) and disgusted rejection. The abject, says Kristeva, generates "a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome" (2). Attraction and rejection are here not separable, but two sides of the same response, which splits the subject confronted by Hyde. Hyde is therefore not just Jekyll's double but a kind of *ur*-double, the figure of the double as such. He taints the perceiving subject with its own abjectness, as we see in the fate of Dr Lanyon, whose "life is shaken to its roots" (50) when he finds out the truth about Hyde, ultimately leading to Lanyon's death.

### THE UNCANNY ENCOUNTER IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

A similar combination of attraction and rejection is foundational to *Frankenstein*, and nowhere more so than in the novel's primal scene, where the former is spectacularly transformed into the latter. In fact there are at least three primal scenes within the novel, as Dolar points out (1991: 20). The first comes when the creature built by Victor Frankenstein from dead body parts first awakens to life (Vol. 1, Ch. 4); the second when the creation of a female mate for the monster on a Scottish island is interrupted, and its still unliving body destroyed by Victor (Vol. 3, Ch. 3); and the third when the creature reappears on Victor's wedding night to murder his wife, Elizabeth, in revenge for the destruction of his own bride (Vol. 3, Ch. 6). The first of these seems most fundamental, however, not only because it is first, but because it is positioned by Mary Shelley, in her retrospective 1831 account of the origins of the novel, as the galvanizing spark of literary composition. Following a discussion between Byron and Percy Shelley, she says, which touched on "the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated" (195), the following took place:

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark



of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

— 196

Shelley's next paragraph begins "I opened mine in terror. The idea so possessed my mind, that a thrill of fear ran through me" (196), emphasizing the alignment of author and creator, and the significance of eyes in this uncanny vision. Shelley claims the scene came to her "unbidden," in a dreamlike if not fully sleeping state, suggesting it has emerged from her unconscious. It is tempting, if ultimately misleading, to analyse this passage as Shelley's dream, following Freud's method in the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). In this case it combines the immediate impressions of the day before (the conversation between Shelley and Byron) and her immediate desires (to write a ghost story) with some more fundamental wish, perhaps the wish to return her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, to life. This wish is, however, immediately counteracted by an opposing fear of reproach from her mother, expressed in the creature's accusatory eyes; on one level this might be reproach for fleeing England with Percy Shelley, but more deeply, perhaps, for having caused her own mother's death in childbirth. Such a death makes the child the abject, that which must be expelled because it is dangerous to life, and which is disgusting because it causes death. The mother becomes abject too, as a beloved source of life that has turned into dead matter. In the novel, the desire to resuscitate Victor's dead mother is hinted as the desire behind his wish to create life, when he hopes that "if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (36).

Such Freudian games are appealing but deceptive, since they seem to promise a deep explanation for the text via the author that can never, in fact, be fulfilled. What we *can* say is that this vision, which is repeated in, or preceded by, Volume I Chapter 4 of the novel, is an archetypal uncanny encounter. More than that, it is a metaphorical crystallization of the literary uncanny. In the first place, the scene combines biology and artificiality, life and death, through a being that is "half vital" and may once again "subside into dead matter," but does not. As Freud remarks, "apparent death and the re-animation of the dead" (*SE* 17: 246) have been called "the most uncanny themes" (*SE* 17: 246), but this is not so in fairy tales, where they are taken as part of the natural course of events. Freud suggests that we must add the element of a return of what was submerged, so that the uncanny arises when "something *actually happens* in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs" (*SE* 17: 246–47), including the belief that the dead really can return. In this case, as with Todorov's fantastic, the uncanny implicitly requires a rationalistic, enlightened framework in order for it to emerge. Paradoxical as it may seem, the uncanny requires something like realism. It is what realism cannot quite contain. It is what haunts it.

As Dolar puts it, "there is a *specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity*" (1991: 7), symbolized by the fact that "the Gothic novel was being written at the same time as the French Revolution" (7). *Hamlet*, which has been taken as an important moment in the birth of modern subjectivity, described as "touched by the marks of the gathering modern crisis on whose

threshold” it stands (Barker: 41; see also Ackerman, Grady: 243–265), can be taken as transitional for the growth of this modern uncanny. On the one hand, Hamlet does not question the reality of the ghost when it first appears, asking not whether it exists but whether it brings “airs from heaven or blasts from hell” (I.IV.45), but on the other hand there is certainly uncanniness in the revelations it brings, and in the many doublings and mirrorings of Hamlet, including Laertes and Horatio (Critchley and Webster, 141–146), his father’s ghost (“I’ll call thee ‘Hamlet,’”/“King,” “father,” “Royal Dane” [I.IV.49–50] he greets it) and his uncle, as noted above.

In *Frankenstein*, meanwhile, the creation of the uncanny itself is at the centre of the text, as it is in “The Sand-Man,” where the scene Freud takes to be primal is uncannily similar to Shelley’s vision quoted above. Nathaniel secretly witnesses his father and an accomplice, Coppelius, working on something which later turns out to be a version of the automaton Olympia. Coppelius, echoing the mythical Sand-man, threatens to tear out the young Nathaniel’s eyes. Freud treats this threat as “a substitute for the dread of being castrated” (*SE* 17: 230). As Sarah Kofman points out, the scene Nathaniel witnesses is “especially *unheimlich* because it is the spectacle of an attempt to create life from inert matter; a vision capable of castrating whoever witnesses it, because it reveals the indissoluble bond between life and death” (80). The same can be said of the creation of the monster in *Frankenstein*, except that here both Mary Shelley and Victor Frankenstein are in the dual position of creator and witness, simultaneously the father/Coppelius and Nathaniel. For Kofman, the uncanny effect is produced by “the coincidence of fantasy with the real” (81; see also Møller 109), but a Lacanian reading can instead frame it as the replacement of fantasy *by* the real. This is clearest in *Frankenstein* in the version of the scene that appears in the novel, which emphasizes the opening of the eye as producing a total reversal of Victor’s consciousness:

My candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

— 38–39

The moment of uncanny horror is the moment the creature’s eye opens to see his creator. In this instant, Victor’s fantasy collapses into a terrifying reality: “The beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (39). In terms of eighteenth-century aesthetics, the beautiful suddenly reverses into the sublime (see Burke; Kant: 35–164). This recalls Harold Bloom’s comment that Freud’s *The Uncanny* is “the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the sublime” (101). Here, however, it is the sudden *replacement* of beauty by sublimity that is uncanny; the reversal of the knowable and homely (the beautiful) into the unknowable and unhomely (the sublime). Burke had tried to keep the two apart, arguing that “they are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure” (101), but *Frankenstein* shows us what happens when this separation spectacularly fails. The

opening of the eyes is, in Freudian terms, a masochistic revelation, in which an object of pleasure turns out to be the cause of enormous pain.

This reversal of fantasy/pleasure/beauty into reality/pain/sublimity is redoubled in Victor's dream, which closely follows the shock of creation:

I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain; I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks.

— 39

The beauty of Elizabeth (Victor's intended bride) collapses into the horrifying corpse of the dead mother. Symbolism is heavily overlaid here; not only is desire for Elizabeth shown to be secretly desire for the dead mother, but desire for life is secretly a desire for death. The novel invites us to align Victor's "beautiful" dream of creating and dominating life with his conventional, but equally illusory, fantasy that Elizabeth can serve as the object of his desire. By contrast, the living creature and the rotting body of the dead mother are both touches of the Lacanian real, which punctures the imaginary and collapses it. At the same time, the scene repeats the moment of creation but inverts it, putting Victor in the position of the monster, as he awakes to look up at its face staring down at him, implicitly undoing his intended mastery of his creation. In both cases the eye is prominent.

In Dolar's Lacanian reading, the gaze of the creature is "the principle source of the uncanniness of the monster" (1991: 20), because it shows the creature to be "the Thing" (20), that impossible object of desire that shows up the lack inherent in the subject, and in the other they desire (here Elizabeth). The Thing [*das Ding*] promises an excessive *jouissance* that is traumatic for the subject because it breaks down both the imaginary (Victor's love for Elizabeth and his family, which are identical in the 1818 version since Elizabeth is his cousin) and the symbolic (the scientific studies Victor has pursued, his position as the masterful father) in favour of a pre-individualized reality (the creature has no name) that we cannot accept without losing all identity. An alternative reading is Halberstam and Peter Brooks's suggestion that the creature is "forever trapped by his hideous appearance in the imaginary" (Halberstam: 44). Reading him as the Thing, however, is to understand the creature as the hidden, the repressed, or unconscious desire come to light, in Freud's terms. Rabaté calls the Thing "a center of exteriority within the subject" (84), agreeing with Dolar that "the main function of the Uncanny is to make the Thing appear" (84), although unlike in *Frankenstein* he finds this "often under the most banal or innocuous guises" (84). Dolar's twist is to propose that the creature is a sociocultural as well as psychical Thing, so that it represents the Enlightenment's desire for a missing "link between matter and spirit, nature and culture" (17),

whose fulfilment turns out to be horrifying. The creature is the realization of both Victor and Enlightenment Man's deepest wish: to gain total control over life and death, to connect "matter . . . nature to culture" (18). But this produces a "lack of lack" (18) that turns out to be a nightmare, not least because it does away with the need for women and turns reproduction into a mechanical function, collapsing the distinction between the human and the non-living.

Most importantly, for Dolar, the uncanny is "always at stake in ideology – ideology perhaps basically consists of a social attempt to integrate the uncanny, to make it bearable, to assign it a place" (1991: 19). The uncanny as that which punctures ideology is useful to psychoanalysis as a "*limit to interpretation*" (19), a limit which in Freud's original essay, as I have mentioned, is literature itself, upon which psychoanalysis runs aground. Dolar returns to the relation between ideology and the uncanny in a recent essay, arguing that the overt display of the obscene in politics and culture in recent years, for which Trump is one major signifier, can be understood as another face of the Freudian uncanny, that which should not be brought to light but is now combined uneasily with the comical. If, in *Frankenstein*, what we see is in large part an anxious attempt by Victor to keep his own obscenity hidden, to maintain the ideological frame of a normal and respectable life despite the insistent reality of the creature he has built, then today that obscenity is proudly displayed; the creature paraded through the streets, so to speak. Yet this is not the lifting of repression, argues Dolar, but a way in which "the repression itself gets repressed" (2020: 678). If this hiding of repression in plain view is one contemporary turn in the recent history of the uncanny, another is an apparent increase in anxiety, and the attention paid to anxiety, and indeed to anxiety about anxiety. For this latter phenomenon, Lacan provides a key.

## THE UNCANNY ANXIETY OF THE THING

In Seminar X, Lacan's stated goal is to reinterpret the uncanny in terms of anxiety, to help us "get a much firmer grip on the conjuncture between anxiety and its uncanny ambiguity" (*S10*: 311). Anxiety, he says, "very likely designates the most, as it were, profound object, the ultimate object, the Thing" (*S10*: 311). The next sentence repeats his most famous definition of anxiety, "that which doesn't deceive" (*S10*: 311). We are not deceived if we are anxious because anxiety points to a fundamental lack in the subject, rather than promising imaginary fulfilment. The creature, indeed, does not deceive Victor; he directly confronts him with his demands (to be cared for, to have a mate). It is Victor's own misinterpretation of the statement "I shall be with you on your wedding-night" (Shelley: 140) that leads him to expect an attempt on his own life, rather than the creature's murder of Elizabeth, despite his claim to Walton that "the monster had blinded me to his real intentions" (161). The "lifeless and inanimate" (165) body of Elizabeth should have been anticipated as revenge for the incomplete female creature which Victor "tore to pieces" (139) in a fit of "madness" (139) in the Orkneys, but it is also an uncanny collapsing of the two halves of Oedipal desire. Both the female creature and Elizabeth are potential or phantom mothers, the first because she is imagined as giving birth to "a race of devils" (138) and the second because she takes the place of Victor's dead mother, caring for the younger children ("you must supply my place to my younger children" (26) Victor's mother tells Elizabeth as she is dying), turns into the dead mother in Victor's dream, and is the phantom mother of the creature, as the intended wife of his creator. Victor reads the desires of the creature as Oedipal, imagining that it wishes to kill him (the father) and, presumably, have sex with Elizabeth in place of the female creature he has destroyed. The creature

instead produces an unfamiliar, uncanny Oedipal fantasy, where the mother/lover is destroyed in place of the father in a violent conjunction of sex and murder. As Halberstam observes of Victor's earlier act, "the act of reproduction becomes here a bloody mess of dismemberment" (47). Its repetition by the creature means that "the domestic woman and the wild woman are both offered up as sacrificial victims to the masculinist narrative of discovery, invention, and competition" (48). The creature is then both the catalyst and the vehicle of Victor's achieved but disavowed desire to give birth without a woman and so destroy the reproductive "purpose" of women.

This narcissistic desire, which returns in Freud through the Wolf-Man's "wish to be born of his father" (*SE* 17: 101), is for a masculine form of parthenogenesis, birth without a sexual relationship. The repetition of this desire in the creature is part of what makes him Victor's double. The horror associated with the successful act of parthenogenesis in *Frankenstein*, however, represents the failure of this narcissism in the face of the double, an experience which "strips us of the autonomy and independence originally sought" (Critchley and Webster: 145), as Critchley and Webster observe of Hamlet's relation to Laertes. We end up with an anxious collapse of the Oedipal scene onto the figure of the dead or monstrous mother. In this way, *Frankenstein* addresses one of the questions Cixous finds in Freud's essay on the uncanny: "Why it is that the maternal landscape, the *heimisch*, and the familiar become so disquieting?" (544). According to Kristeva, too, the mother's body is archetypally abject, a place where the subject looks for "the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject" (54). For Cixous, the answer is associated with "the obliteration of any separation, the realization of the desire which in itself obliterates a limit" (544). In Shelley's novel, it is the reduplicated realization of Victor's desire, its doubling, that is uncannily terrifying, not least because it variously puts him in place of the mother, suggests a sexual relationship with her, and betrays her. First there is the desired creation of the monster, which as mentioned above comes from a desire to resurrect the mother, but also puts Victor in the place of his mother as well as his father (the creature being his double). This monstrous birth is implicitly a betrayal of his mother's dying wish for a "union" (Shelley: 26) between him and Elizabeth, which alongside her wish that Elizabeth "supply my place" (26) binds Victor into an incestuous family circle. Secondly, the creature acts out the implicitly desired destruction of a family that Victor has already rejected twice over: once to study in Ingolstadt (28) and then again when he undertakes a tour of England for "two years" (127) before committing to marriage with Elizabeth. Part of the horror of the creature then, and its uncanniness, is the way it stands in for both Victor's desire, including his desire for his mother, and for the resurrection of her dead body, as well as his rejection of that desire.

If we take our cue from *Frankenstein*, then instead of the Oedipal fantasy we might agree with Dolar in placing the uncanny, and hence also anxiety and literature, at the "very core of psychoanalysis" (Dolar: 5). As Vine puts it, "psychoanalysis is not just a theory of the uncanny but itself *an uncanny theory*" (64). In this case, we undo any claims to mastery the discipline might have. To put it in polemical terms, the psychoanalyst is revealed to be in the position of Victor Frankenstein: after thinking himself to be the master scientist, he awakes to find himself on the couch, subject to inexplicable demands that he does not know how to fulfil. In Shelley's novel, the birth of the creature inaugurates a state of anxiety for Victor, which runs through the rest of the novel, and which turns him from the knowing, Promethean subject ("what had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world, was now within my grasp" [34]) to one who avoids "with shuddering anxiety any encounter with my fellow-creatures" (143). In this, he

comes to replicate the experience of the creature. This move from confidence to doubt repeats in dramatic terms the contours of Freud's original essay, which begins by seeking to provide an explanation for the uncanny, but ends with uncertainty about the capacity of psychoanalysis to understand both literature and the uncanny: "the storyteller has a *peculiarly* directive power over us," Freud writes, "by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material" (*SE* 17: 250). Behind Freud's "peculiarly" we might read "uncannily." The uncanniness of literature is here not so much explained as reduplicated at the level of form, since the uncanny is described as an effect that comes from an uncanny power of the author. But what is that power? From what does it derive? There is a gap here which cannot be fully explained, though its contours can be described. This signifying absence, or rather unsettling plenitude, is the place named by the uncanny. If psychoanalysis has described this place, it is literature which allows us to experience it.

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