

Narcissism and the Aesthetics of 'The Uncanny'

Georgia Walker Churchman

Freud's account of the relationship between uncanny experience, fear and danger dominates 'The Uncanny', perhaps his most notoriously dilatory essay. His comments on the compelling and beautiful aspects of uncanny experience are much less prominent: notable, indeed, largely by their absence. Drawing on Lou Andreas-Salomé's work in 'The Dual Orientation of Narcissism', this contribution attempts to flesh out Freud's comments on uncanny experience's compelling allure.

To contemporary ears, some of the most plangent phrasing in 'The Uncanny' comes at precisely the moments in which a strikingly beautiful moment or object is being described. The long extracts from the dictionary definitions of 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich' are especially beautiful: the phrases 'the place as so peaceful, so lonely, so shadily-heimlich', 'the in-and outflowing waves of the current, dreamy and lullaby-heimlich' and 'I have roots that are most heimlich. They are buried in the deep earth' are particularly resonant (U1: 223–4). Yet Freud offers no comment on the aesthetic power of these quotations. Similarly, in his response to 'Inexplicable', the story of the young couple who move into a haunted London villa, he focuses only on the 'curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it' and the 'intolerable and very specific smell' it provokes (U1: 244). No mention is made of the aesthetic draw of the 'extraordinarily beautiful' yet 'sinister' object around which the plot revolves.¹

This apparent difficulty regarding the nature of the aesthetics of uncanny experience is clearest in a comparison of Freud's reading of Hoffman's 'The Sandman' and *Die Elixir Des Teufels*. 'The Sandman' reading is a *tour de force* of interpretative brio: in the space of three

pages, he demonstrates the relationship between the Sandman and the Oedipal father figure, explicates the Sandman's obsession with eyes, and dispatches with both Jentsch's claim that intellectual uncertainty causes uncanny sensations, and any doubts that the primary issue at stake in uncanny feelings is repressed castration anxiety. A mere footnote (albeit a long one) figures Nathaniel's 'senseless obsessive love' for the doll Olympia as simply a 'materialisation of Nathaniel's feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy' (U1: 232). No account is given of the draw of her strangely immobile beauty.

At the very point of Freud's interpretive triumph, however, he moves away from the certainties generated by 'The Sandman' to describe the effect of *Die Elixir des Teufels*. The contrast between his discussion of these two texts is marked. Whereas his commentary on 'The Sandman' is peppered with certitudes ('uncertainty... is quite irrelevant' (U1: 230)), his analysis of *Die Elixir des Teufels* is more tentative: it seems impossible for Freud to regain the clarity of the preceding section. The novel is:

too obscure and intricate a story for us to venture upon a summary of it. Towards the end of the book the reader is told the facts, hitherto concealed from him, from which the action springs; with the result, not that he is at last enlightened, but that he falls into a state of complete bewilderment. The author has piled up too much material of the same kind. In consequence one's grasp of the story suffers, though not the impression it makes... These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the 'double', which appears in every shape and in every degree of development... In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self... Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (U1: 234-5)

Ultimately, this reading leads Freud back to the primary assertion that 'the uncanny' 'is that class of the frightening that leads us back to what is known of old and long familiar' (U1: 220). However, the

effect of *Die Elixir des Teufels* as Freud describes it, with its ‘doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self’ and the ‘bewilderment’ of the final revelations, put the reader in mind not of an ‘uncanny harbinger of death’, but of the very phase of primary narcissism to which Freud refers in the passage. It is also fascinating that the account of precisely how this double ‘reverses its aspect’ is asserted rather than demonstrated. How and why does this transformation from ‘assurance’ to ‘uncanny harbinger’ come about?

My suggestion is that the ambiguous effect of uncanny experience can be accounted for by the complex relation between narcissism and the uncanny—relations which in some regard appear to trouble the theoretical claims made by Freud in ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’, but that speak to Lou Andreas-Salomé’s complication of Freud’s ideas in ‘The Dual Orientation of Narcissism’.² As Freud in ‘The Uncanny’ assumes we know, primary narcissism is the state in which the infant child cannot feel any differentiation between itself and the world around it: it is therefore a period in which there is simply no distinction between the alive and the un-alive, self and world. According to Freud, secondary attachments are those in which the libido is extended outwards—in Freud’s famous analogy, the libido is sent forth like a pseudopod from the body of an amoeba. However, in secondary narcissism, these pseudopods are instead drawn back on the ego itself. As a result, narcissistic attachments do not focus on what the loved object is *per se*, but instead on how loving that particular object reflects back onto—indeed constitutes—the ego dominated by narcissistic-type attachments. It is this account that gives rise to the distinction between mourning and melancholia: in normal mourning, libido is painfully withdrawn from the no-longer-existent object; in pathological melancholia, this procedure cannot take place because the libido is in fact not extended to the object at all, but has been introjected into the ego’s own structures.

My suggestion is that we can clarify the relationship between narcissism and uncanny aesthetics through Lou Andreas-Salomé’s work on narcissism. While Freud insists on a fundamental difference between primary narcissism, in which the infant has no concept of a world outside itself, and a secondary narcissism in which the libido is directed towards the ego, Andreas-Salomé’s work troubles the distinction between the two. Describing the libido as ‘the connecting

link between the desire for individuality. . . and the contrary movement towards conjugation and fusion', her work is attentive to both the pleasures and the dangers of the narcissistic moment, claiming that 'it seems to me therefore to be dangerous not to emphasise the essential duality of the concept of narcissism'.³ In her reading, narcissism is a primary part of the ego, and the libido is 'essentially narcissistic in its substance and provenance'.⁴ The central distinction between libido, ego and ego-instinct disappears.

It is an aestheticised version of this 'contrary movement' between the appeal of 'individuality' and the allure of 'conjugation and fusion' that I think we can see at work in 'The Uncanny'. The doll Olympia functions as a striking figuration of this duality. Her mechanical nature bespeaks an object that exists within a world in which the distinction between people and things does not pertain, while her disturbing self-sufficiency is indicative of a self-rooted, self-perpetuating narcissism. Similarly, the haunting crocodiles of 'Inexplicable' and the long quotations from the dictionary: the 'place was so peaceful, so lonely, so shadily-heimlich', 'the in-and outflowing waves of the current, dreamy and lullaby-heimlich' and 'I have roots that are most heimlich. They are buried in the deep earth' derive at least some of their power, I would argue, from the blurring they seem to offer between the individual experiencing the world and the world itself (U1: 223-4). Perhaps 'The Uncanny' struggles to explicitly articulate this effect because its intellectual forefather is implicitly taken to be Oedipus, not Narcissus: the knower of secrets rather than the seer into lakes and mirrors. In a final twist, however, I would argue that the endless fascination of this essay is partially due to the oscillation between the one and the two, between the explicit and implicit, the known and unarticulated.

Notes

¹ L. G. Moberly, 'Inexplicable', *The Strand Magazine*, 1917 (Vol 2), 572–581 (here, 573).

² Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', in *SE* 14: 87–104; Lou Andreas-Salomé, 'The Dual Orientation of Narcissism', trans. by Stanley A. Leavy, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 31 (1962), 1–30.

³ 'The Dual Orientation of Narcissism', 4.

⁴ 'The Dual Orientation of Narcissism', 10.