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“I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night”: Lacan and the Uncanny

MLADEN DOLAR

The dimension of the uncanny, introduced by Freud in his famous paper, is located at the very core of psychoanalysis.¹ It is the dimension where all the concepts of psychoanalysis come together, where its diverse lines of argument form a knot. The uncanny provides a clue to the basic project of psychoanalysis. And yet Freud appears to be somewhat at a loss about how to make use of this clue. Although he enumerates a number of instances of the uncanny, giving an array of examples embellished with theoretical reflections, he leaves us in the end with only a sketch or a prolegomenon to a theory of the uncanny. Exactly how the different pieces fit together remains unclear.

The Estimate

Freud starts off with a lengthy linguistic discussion of the German term *das Unheimliche*. It was fortunate for Freud that such a paradoxical word existed in the German language, and perhaps it gave him the idea for the paper in the first place. The word is the standard German negation of *heimlich* and is thus supposed to be its opposite. But it turns out that it is actually directly implied by *heimlich*, which means familiar, homely, cozy, intimate, “arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house”; by extension, what is familiar and securely tucked away is also hidden, concealed from the outside, secret, “kept from sight . . . withheld from others”; and by a further extension, what is hidden and secret is also threatening, fearful, occult, “uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal . . . ghastly”—that is, *unheimlich*, uncanny.² There is a point where the two meanings directly coincide and become undistinguishable, and the negation does not count—as indeed it does not count

1. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’ ” (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 221, 222, 225.

in the unconscious.³ The English translation, “the uncanny,” largely retains the essential ambiguity of the German term, but French doesn’t possess an equivalent, *l’inquiétante étrangeté* being the standard translation. So Lacan had to invent one, *extimité*.

This term aims directly at the essential dimension of psychoanalysis. Putting this simply, one could say that traditional thought consisted of the constant effort to draw a clear line between the interior and the exterior. All the great philosophical conceptual pairs—essence/appearance, mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc.—can be seen as just so many transcriptions of the division between interiority and exteriority. Now the dimension of *extimité* blurs this line. It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*. Freud writes, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”⁴ And it is this very dimension beyond the division into “psychic” and “real” that deserves to be called the real in the Lacanian sense.

Freud then proceeds in an “inductive” way, somewhat haphazardly enumerating different instances of this strange dimension—the paradoxical realm between the living and the dead (what Lacan will later call the area “between two deaths”); the anxiety provoked by the double, the point where narcissism becomes unbearable; “the evil eye” and the dimension of the gaze; the series of coincidences that suddenly bear a fateful meaning (where the real, so to speak, begins to speak); cut off limbs; etc. It is obvious that the different cases have a simple Lacanian common denominator which is the irruption of the real into “homely,” commonly accepted reality. We can speak of the emergence of something that shatters well-known divisions and which cannot be situated within them. (This holds not only for the classical divisions subject/object, interior/exterior, etc., but also for the “early” Lacanian division symbolic/imaginary.) The status both of the subject and of “objective reality” is thus put into question.

In dealing with the different instances, Freud is gradually forced to use the entire panoply of psychoanalytic concepts: castration complex, Oedipus, (primary) narcissism, compulsion to repeat, death drive, repression, anxiety, psychosis, etc. They all seem to converge on “the uncanny.” One could simply say that it is the pivotal point around which psychoanalytic concepts revolve, the point that Lacan calls object small *a* and which he himself considered his most important contribution to psychoanalysis.

3. “The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. ‘No’ seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing.” *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. IV, p. 318.

4. Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” p. 220.

It seems that Freud speaks about a "universal" of human experience when he speaks of the uncanny, yet his own examples tacitly point to its location in a specific historical conjuncture, to the particular historical rupture brought about by the Enlightenment. There is *a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity*. What I am interested in is not the uncanny as such, but the uncanny that is closely linked with the advent of modernity and which constantly haunts it from the inside. To put it simply, in premodern societies the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable. It was assigned to a religiously and socially sanctioned place in the symbolic from which the structure of power, sovereignty, and a hierarchy of values emanated. With the triumph of the Enlightenment, this privileged and excluded place (the exclusion that founded society) was no more. That is to say that the uncanny became unplaceable; it became uncanny in the strict sense. Popular culture, always extremely sensitive to the historical shifts, took successful hold of it—witness the immense popularity of Gothic fiction and its romantic aftermath.⁵ It has often been pointed out that the Gothic novel was being written at the same time as the French Revolution. There was an irruption of the uncanny strictly parallel with bourgeois (and industrial) revolutions and the rise of scientific rationality—and, one might add, with the Kantian establishment of transcendental subjectivity, of which the uncanny presents the surprising counterpart.⁶ Ghosts, vampires, monsters, the undead dead, etc., flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place. They are something brought about by modernity itself.

Freud, in his paper, gives a somewhat misleading impression when he says that the uncanny is the return of something long surmounted, discarded, and superseded in the past. Just as Lacan has argued that the subject of psychoanalysis is the subject of modernity based in the Cartesian cogito and unthinkable without the Kantian turn, so one has to extend the argument to the realm of the object, the object *a*. It, too, is most intimately linked with and produced by the rise of modernity. What seems to be a leftover is actually a product of modernity, its counterpart.

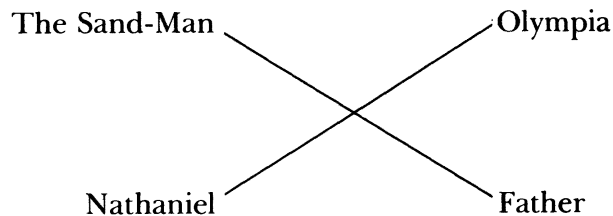
The Quadruple

Let us see how the Lacanian "simplification"—the introduction of a common pivotal point—affects Freud's formulations on the uncanny. Freud takes as the paradigmatic case the well-known short story "The Sand-Man" by E. T. A. Hoffmann, an example suggested by Jentsch and which serves Freud's

5. See James Donald's excellent account, "The Fantastic, the Sublime and the Popular; or What's at Stake in Vampire Films?" in *Fantasy and the Cinema*, ed. James Donald (London: British Film Institute, 1989).

6. See Slavoj Žižek's article in this issue.

purpose very well. Freud's account of the story hinges upon two relations: the one between the student Nathaniel, the hero of the story, and Olympia, the young girl of angelic beauty who turns out to be a doll, an automaton; the other between the Sand-Man figure, in his various guises as the lawyer Coppelius, the optician Coppola, and the Father (later partly substituted by Professor Spalanzani).⁷ One is tempted to place the four characters on the two intersecting diagonals of the sort of L-scheme proposed by Lacan:



Of course this diagram doesn't correspond at all to Lacan's original intention and illustrates a different point. The L-scheme was introduced in order to situate the imaginary ego produced by the mirror phase in relation to the symbolic, to the Other of the symbolic order, and to a subject that is not an ego. So the entire tension of Lacan's diagram, the drama it represents, is between the imaginary and the symbolic diagonals. In our case, both the "imaginary" line (Nathaniel-Olympia) and the "symbolic" one are haunted by the intrusion of the real, the dimension that was not yet elaborated in early Lacan and had no assigned place in the L-scheme, or which was present there only in an implicit way. With its introduction, both diagonals become troubled and presage a disaster.

Nathaniel falls madly in love with this beautiful girl who seems remarkably silent and reticent. It is true that she dances and she sings (as one can hear in Offenbach's *Hoffmann's Tales*), but in a very mechanical way, keeping her beat too accurately. Her vocabulary is rather limited; she only exclaims "Oh! oh!" from time to time and says "Good night, love!" at the end of long conversations in which he is the only speaker. Her eyes gaze into emptiness for hours on end. Nathaniel never tires of watching her through his spy glass, and this is sufficient for bringing about the folly of love: "She says but a few words, that is true,"

7. Hélène Cixous points out in "La Fiction et ses Fantômes: Une lecture de l'Unheimliche de Freud," *Poétique* (1972), vol. 10, pp. 199–216, that Freud makes some arbitrary cuts in Hoffmann's story and doesn't take into account the subtlety of his narrative strategy. Although this is true to some extent, one could show that those elements do not contradict Freud's reading. It seems that Cixous tries to prove too much; for the very act of interpreting operates by arbitrary cuts and the alleged wealth of the object interpreted is a retroactive effect of the very interpretation that seemed to reduce it. Here, rather than claiming any fidelity to an original textual wealth, I proceed by taking up only one essential point that interests me.

remarks Nathaniel, "but these few words appear as genuine hieroglyphs of an inner world full of love and a higher knowledge of the spiritual life in contemplation of the eternal Beyond." "Oh you glorious, profound nature, only you, you alone understand me completely!"⁸ A blank screen, empty eyes, and an "Oh!": it is enough to drive anybody crazy with love. There is a strange reversal in this situation: the problem is not simply that Olympia turns out to be an automaton (contrived by the Sand-Man figure Coppola, who contributed the eyes, and Spalanzani, who took care of the mechanism) and is thus in the uncanny area between the living and the dead; it is that Nathaniel strangely reacts in a mechanical way. His love for an automaton is itself automatic; his fiery feelings are mechanically produced ("his senseless obsessive [*zwanghafte*, compulsory] love for Olympia," says Freud).⁹ It takes so little to set up that blank screen from which he only receives his own message. The question arises as to who is the real automaton in the situation, for the appearance of the automaton calls for an automatic response, it entails an automatic subjectivation.

Hoffmann's ironical twist, the social parody implied in the episode, highlights the role socially assigned to the woman: it is enough to be there, at the appropriate place, at the most to utter an "Oh!" at the appropriate time, to produce that specter of The Woman, that figure of the Other. The mechanical doll only highlights the mechanical character of "intersubjective" relations. It is the character exploited by the position of the analyst: the analyst, too, utters at the most an "Oh!" here and there (and perhaps a "Good night, love!"); he makes himself an automaton in order to give rise to the dimension of the Other, the real interlocutor of the patient's "monologue," and also in order to produce that strange kind of love, perhaps love in its strictest and purest sense, which is transference love. Nathaniel's lengthy conversations with Olympia prefigure the analytic session.

But Olympia is both the Other to whom Nathaniel addresses his love and his amatory discourse (like the Lady of courtly love) and his narcissistic supplement (love can after all be seen as the attempt to make the Other the same, to reconcile it with narcissism). Like him, she is in the position of a child toward the father figures: "Her fathers, Spalanzani and Coppola, are . . . nothing but new editions, reincarnations of Nathaniel's pair of fathers."¹⁰ She is his sister-image, the realization of his essential ambivalence in relation to the father figure—the attempt to identify with the father on one hand, and to make oneself an object for him, to offer oneself as the object of his love on the other (what Freud calls the "feminine attitude"): "Olympia is, as it were, a dissociated complex of Nathaniel's which confronts him as a person."¹¹ She is his "better

8. E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Tales of Hoffmann* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 117 and 118.

9. Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" p. 232.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

half," the missing half that could make him whole, but which turns out to be the materialized, emancipated death drive. She presents the point where the narcissistic complement turns lethal, where the imaginary stumbles on the real.

Olympia's position is conditioned by the tension of the second diagonal that connects the two father figures, the father and the Sand-Man. The threat of a loss of sight, the menace to one's eyes, which is the red thread of the story and for Freud the main source of its uncanny character, is immediately connected with the castration complex, the threat of the loss of what is most valuable. Hoffmann's story treats this complex in the simplest and most classical way, with the duplication of father figures. The father is split into the good father, the protector and the bearer of the universal Law, and the bad father, the castrator, the menacing and jealous figure that evokes the father of the primal horde, the father linked with terrible *jouissance*. The good father protects Nathaniel's eyes; the bad one threatens with blinding. The good father is killed by the bad one, who takes the blame for it, thus resolving in a simple way the essential ambivalence toward the father, the subject's love for him and his death-wish against him. But the tension between the two fathers is irresolvable: behind the father who is the bearer of the Law, and as such reduced to the "Name-of-the-Father" (i.e., the dead father), there is the horrible castrating figure that Lacan has called the "father-*jouissance*," the father who wouldn't die and who comes to haunt the Law (and actually endows it with its effectiveness). The Sand-Man is the bearer of this terrible and lethal *jouissance*.

For Freud, the uncanny effect depends on castration, which also links together the two diagonals and centers them on the relation to the object. The Sand-Man as the castrating figure and the figure of *jouissance* "always appears as the disturber of love [*Störer der Liebe*]." He is the intruder who always emerges at the moment when the subject comes close to fulfilling a "sexual relation," to find his imaginary supplement and become a "whole."¹² It is because of the appearance of the father-*jouissance* on the symbolic diagonal that the completion fails on the imaginary one. One could say that in this first approach, the uncanny is precisely what bars the sexual relation; it is the dimension that prevents us from finding our Platonian missing halves and hence imaginary completion; it is the dimension that blocks the fulfillment of our subjectivity. The objectal dimension at one and the same time opens the threat of castration and comes to fill the gap of castration. The uncanny emerges as a reality, but one which has its only substance in a positivization of negativity, a negative existence, castration. The positive presence of the objectal dimension is the "positive expression" of what Lacan, in one of his most famous dictums, has called the absence of sexual relation ("*Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*").

12. "He separates Nathaniel from his betrothed and from her brother, his best friend; he destroys the second object of his love, Olympia, the lovely doll; and he drives him into suicide at the moment when he has won back his Clara and is about to be happily united to her" (Ibid., p. 231).

The Double

The dimension of the double, another source of the uncanny, simplifies the quadruple scheme of the Sand-Man into a dual relation where the tension appears between the subject and his double. Freud dwells on the omnipresence, the obsession with the theme of the double in Hoffmann's work, and mentions the then-recent example of Stellan Rye's film *Der Student von Prag*. The exhaustive studies by Otto Rank and more recently by Karl Miller have shown the very extensive use of this motive in literature (and elsewhere), particularly its incredible proliferation in the romantic era.¹³ The authors range (apart from Hoffmann) from Chamisso (Peter Schlemihl), the Gothic novel, Andersen, Lenau, Goethe, Jean Paul, Hogg, Heine, Musset, Maupassant, Wilde, etc., to Poe (William Wilson) and Dostoyevsky (Golyadkin).

There are some simple structural features of these stories that can themselves have a number of complex ramifications with different outcomes. The subject is confronted with his double, the very image of himself (that can go along with the disappearance, or trading off, of his mirror image or his shadow), and this crumbling of the subject's accustomed reality, this shattering of the bases of his world, produces a terrible anxiety.¹⁴ Usually only the subject can see his own double, who takes care to appear only in private, or for the subject alone. The double produces two seemingly contradictory effects: he arranges things so that they turn out badly for the subject, he turns up at the most inappropriate moments, he dooms him to failure; and he realizes the subject's hidden or repressed desires so that he does things he would never dare to do or that his conscience wouldn't let him do. In the end, the relation gets so unbearable that the subject, in a final showdown, kills his double, unaware that his only substance and his very being were concentrated in his double. So in killing him he kills himself. "You have conquered, and I yield," says Wilson's double in Poe's story. "Yet henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself."¹⁵ As a rule, all these stories finish badly: the moment one encounters one's double, one is headed for disaster; there seems to be no way out. (In clinical cases of autoscopia—meeting or seeing one's double—the prognosis is also rather bad and the outcome is likely to be tragic.)¹⁶

Otto Rank gives an extensive account of the theme of the double in different mythologies and superstitions.¹⁷ For all of them the shadow and the

13. Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (London: Karnac-Maresfield Library, 1989) and Karl Miller, *Doubles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

14. The heroes of these stories are always male. As will appear later, the double is also a device to avoid a relationship to femininity and sexuality in general.

15. Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings*, ed. David Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

16. See Eric Blumel, "L'hallucination du double," *Analytica* 22 (1980), pp. 35–53.

17. Rank, *The Double*.

mirror image are the obvious analogues of the body, its immaterial doubles, and thus the best means to represent the soul. The shadow and the mirror image survive the body due to their immateriality—so it is that reflections constitute our essential selves.¹⁸ The image is more fundamental than its owner: it institutes his substance, his essential being, his “soul”; it is his most valuable part; it makes him a human being.¹⁹ It is his immortal part, his protection against death.

In a way, psychoanalysis would agree. After all, this is what Lacan’s theory of the mirror-phase aims at: it is only by virtue of one’s mirror reflection that one can become endowed with an ego, establish oneself as an “I.” My “ego-identity” comes from my double. But the trouble with the double springs from the fact that he seems to stand for all three instances of Freud’s “second topic”: he constitutes the essential part of the ego; he carries out the repressed desires springing from the Id; and he also, with a malevolence typical of the superego, prevents the subject from carrying out his desires—all at one and the same time. So how do the three instances fit together?

There is a moment in the legend of Narcissus when the blind seer Tiresias makes a prophecy to the beautiful boy’s mother: “Narcissus will live to a ripe old age, provided that he never knows himself.”²⁰ The prophecy seems directly to contradict the old philosophical dictum “Know thyself!” Instead, for Tiresias, an essential ignorance appears as the condition of a long and happy life. In fact, Narcissus *will* come to know himself, *will* prefer the philosophical maxim to the prophet’s offer, and that knowledge will be fateful for him. The legend foretells of the loss that is always already implied by the minimal narcissistic mechanism presented by the mirror phase.

To put it simply: when I recognize myself in the mirror it is already too late. There is a split: I cannot recognize myself and at the same time be one with myself. With the recognition I have already lost what one could call “self-being,” the immediate coincidence with myself in my being and *jouissance*. The rejoicing in the mirror image, the pleasure and the self-indulgence, has already been paid for. The mirror double immediately introduces the dimension of castration—the doubling itself already, even in its minimal form, implies castration: “This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration

18. There is also the traditional “animistic” belief that what befalls the image will befall its owner—for example, the superstition which is still alive concerning cracked mirrors. See Heine, as quoted in Rank: “There is nothing more uncanny than seeing one’s face accidentally in a mirror by moonlight” (p. 43). This explains why ghosts, vampires, etc., don’t cast shadows and don’t have mirror reflections: they are themselves already shadows and reflections.

19. That is why trading one’s image in a kind of “pact with the Devil” or with some occult substitute always ends badly: the Devil knows the importance of the image, and the subject overlooks it.

20. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).

by a doubling or a multiplication of a genital symbol."²¹ The multiplicity of snakes on Medusa's head, to take another example from Freud, is there to dissimulate the lack; the One, the Unique is missing. So the doubling, in the simplest way, entails the loss of that uniqueness that one could enjoy in one's self-being, but only at the price of being neither an ego nor a subject. The doubling cuts one off from a part, the most valuable part, of one's being, the immediate self-being of *jouissance*. This is what Lacan will later add to his early theory of the mirror phase: the object *a* is precisely that part of the loss that one cannot see in the mirror, the part of the subject that has no mirror reflection, the nonspecular. The mirror in the most elementary way already implies the split between the imaginary and the real: one can only have access to imaginary reality, to the world one can recognize oneself in and familiarize oneself with, on the condition of the loss, the "falling out," of the object *a*. It is this loss of the object *a* that opens "objective" reality, the possibility of subject-object relations, but since its loss is the condition of any knowledge of "objective" reality, it cannot itself become an object of knowledge.

We can now see the trouble with the double: the double is that mirror image in which the object *a* is included. So the imaginary starts to coincide with the real, provoking a shattering anxiety. The double is the same as me plus the object *a*, that invisible part of being added to my image. In order for the mirror image to contain the object *a*, a wink or a nod is enough. Lacan uses the gaze as the best presentation of that missing object; in the mirror, one can see one's eyes, but not the gaze which is the part that is lost. But imagine that one could see one's mirror image close its eyes: that would make the object as gaze appear in the mirror. This is what happens with the double, and the anxiety that the double produces is the surest sign of the appearance of the object. (It can also be brought about in the opposite way, by the disappearance of one's mirror image, technically dubbed "the negative autoscopia," an example of which is to be found in Maupassant's *Le Horla*.) Here the Lacanian account of anxiety differs sharply from other theories: it is not produced by a lack or a loss or an incertitude; it is not the anxiety of losing something (the firm support, one's bearings, etc.). On the contrary, it is the anxiety of gaining something too much, of a too-close presence of the object. What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss—the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality. "Anxiety is the lack of the support of the lack," says Lacan; the lack lacks, and this brings about the uncanny.²²

The inclusion of the object also entails the emergence of that lost part of *jouissance*. The double is always the figure of *jouissance*: on one hand, he is somebody who enjoys at the subject's expense; he commits acts that one wouldn't

21. Ibid., pp. 356–57.

22. See Blumel, "L'hallucination," p. 49.

dare to commit, he indulges in one's repressed desires and makes sure that the blame falls on the subject. On the other hand, though, he is not simply someone who enjoys, but essentially a figure that commands *jouissance*. The double is a "disturber of love": he typically springs up at the moment when one is about to touch, or to kiss, the girl of one's dreams; he springs up when the subject comes close to the realization of his wishes, when he is on the brink of attaining full enjoyment, the completion of the sexual relation. But while the double appears to be the one who spoils and obstructs, what is significant is the choice of the object. It is myself who prefers the double, the one who retains the object and who can provide *jouissance* and being, to the beautiful girl who can give me pleasure. Only the alter ego can offer the true *jouissance* that I am not willing to give up in favor of pleasure. The magnificent young girl is rather the obstacle to my privileged relation to myself; she is the real spoiler in this game, the spoiler of narcissism, so one has to get rid of her (and the double takes care of this) in order to join my real partner, my double. He retains that lost primordial object for which no woman can be a substitute. But of course joining one's *jouissance*, regaining one's primordial being, is lethal. The subject can only attain it by his death.

The appearance of the object in reality doesn't make it an object of possible "objective" knowledge. As a rule, it appears only to the subject; the others don't see it and therefore don't understand the subject's peculiar behavior. It cannot become a part of accepted intersubjective space. It is the privileged private object accessible only to the subject, his incorporated self-being.

The double, retaining the object, also immediately introduces the death drive. The original function of the double (as the shadow and the mirror image) was "an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death' . . . and probably the 'immortal soul' was the first 'double' of the body."²³ Yet what was designed as a defense against death, as a protection of narcissism—one's mortality is that *ananke* which most immediately contradicts and limits the narcissistic wholeness—turns into its harbinger: when the double appears, the time is up. One could say that the double inaugurates the dimension of the real precisely as the protection against "real" death. It introduces the death drive, that is, the drive in its fundamental sense, as a defense against biological death. The double is the initial repetition, the first repetition of the same, but also that which keeps repeating itself, emerging in the same place (one of the Lacanian definitions of the real), springing up at the most awkward times, both as an irruption of the unexpected and with clockwork precision, totally unpredictable and predictable in one.

But the intrusion of the real in stories about the double is drastic and dramatic, and is not part of everyday experience. It can spring up for a

23. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p. 356.

moment—as in that highly unpleasant experience of Freud's when he met his mirror double in the very cozy and homely setting of a *wagon-lit* compartment while alone in his dressing gown and traveling cap.²⁴ The world was out of joint, for that instant, with the apparition of the intruder, an elderly gentleman dressed just like him, until he recognized his own mirror reflection. But “normally” the lack implied in narcissism is the pivotal point between the mirror phase and the Oedipus—that which can give it a “normal” outcome. What happens with the Oedipus, which is the entry into the symbolic, is the shift in which the loss entailed by the mirror reflection is inscribed into the register of the Name-of-the-Father. The father's Law is what now denies the subject his self-being, the immediacy of his *jouissance*, as well as the access to that primordial object of completion which is the mother. The father takes responsibility for the loss, which makes him an ambiguous figure, subject to a lack and split into a “good” and a “bad” father, producing the object that cannot fit into the paternal law. The Law offers words instead of things (instead of the Thing); it guarantees the objective world instead of the object. This is the only way it is possible for the subject to deal with the loss, although this operation necessarily produces a remainder which will come to haunt reality as it is instituted. The immediate appeal of the theme of the double lies in the fact that it points to that remainder. In fact, we are never rid of the predicament of the mirror reflection.

The theme of animism is closely connected to narcissism; it is its prolongation. The reality that is opposed to narcissistic sufficiency is conceived as subject to the same “psychological” laws as interiority—it is animated, inhabited by spirits, etc. One gives up part of one's omnipotence to those spirits, but since they are of the same nature as the ego, one can influence them, seduce them, trade with them. The underlying assumption is the omnipotence of thought; “the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced . . . a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes.”²⁵ There is the class of phenomena where a series of coincidences and contingent events suddenly starts to signify and take on a fateful meaning, or conversely, a chance event seems to realize one's thought, thus confirming the belief in its omnipotence. “I know that thoughts can't kill, but nevertheless . . . I believe they do.” Here too, the source of the uncanny is the reappearance of a part that was necessarily lost with the emergence of the subject—the intersection between the “psychic” and the “real,” the interior and the exterior, the “word” and the “object,” the symbol and the symbolized—the point where the real immediately coincides with the symbolic to be put into the service of the imaginary. So what is uncanny is again the recuperation of the loss: the lost part destroys reality instead of completing it.

24. Ibid., p. 371.

25. Ibid., p. 367.

The Unique

So far I have considered the uncanny on a rather general level, following Freud's examples, which are, although he never explicitly mentions it, historically situated. Hoffmann, the sudden emergence of the doubles in the romantic era, the extraordinary obsession with ghosts, vampires, undead dead, monsters, etc., in Gothic fiction and all through the nineteenth century, the realm of the fantastic—they all point to the emergence of the uncanny at a very precise historical moment. It is Frankenstein, however, that is perhaps the best example of this.

I started with a quadruple scheme in Hoffmann's tale, which was then reduced to a dual relationship with the double. Now we can undertake a further simplification or condensation of the problem by reducing it to a single element best presented by the theme of the monster.

It appears at first sight that Frankenstein is the direct opposite of the theme of the double: the creature created by Frankenstein is a monster without a name, and his basic problem in the novel is precisely that he cannot find his double.²⁶ It is a creature without filiation or a genealogy, without anybody who would recognize or accept him (not even his creator). His narcissism is thus thwarted from the outset, and the main part of the plot actually springs from his demand for a partner, somebody like him, a wife, so that he could start a line, a new filiation. He is One and Unique, and as such he cannot even have a name—he cannot be represented by a signifier (which absence is often "spontaneously" filled in by his "father's" name), he cannot be a part of the symbolic. The story itself had the strange fate of becoming a "modern myth," a very rare occurrence indeed. The huge number of different versions in which the original is virtually lost testifies to this fact. All these versions turn around the same fantasmatic kernel, retranscribing it to infinity. It is a myth in the Lévi-Straussian sense of the word: the myth as "a logical model to resolve a contradiction (an insoluble task if the contradiction is real)"²⁷—ultimately the contradiction between nature and culture.

The myth has its starting point in scientific discourse. Shelley's "Introduction" takes up Erasmus Darwin as the witness, along with the background of research into electromagnetic occurrences, galvanism, etc. The possibility of creating a human being seems to be just a small extension of the seemingly limitless possibilities of the new science. But the connection with the Enlightenment goes much further.

26. I am greatly indebted to two recent analyses: Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Frankenstein: Mythe et Philosophie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1988). But I concentrate on only one line of argument, neglecting other possibilities offered by the material.

27. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Monique Layton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

The subtitle, "The Modern Prometheus," was probably directly borrowed from La Mettrie's *L'Homme-Machine*.²⁸ La Mettrie praises the craft of Vaucanson, the famous French constructor of automatons (a highly successful flute player, to say nothing of the digesting duck). It seems that he was not far from being able to produce a speaking being—"the machine which should not be considered as impossible any more, especially in the hands of a new Prometheus"²⁹—with which La Mettrie only gives voice to a fantasy that was then very much alive: if Descartes could think of animals as machines, somewhat more complicated than human products, if he could see the human body as essentially a mechanism, a machine like a watch, it was only to highlight the difference between the *res extensa* and the spirit. The Galilean revolution in physics opened the perspective of the cosmos as a mechanism (hence the ubiquitous presence of billiard balls and clockwork in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and put in question the autonomy of the spiritual. A hundred years later La Mettrie's point was precisely to do away with that difference, to see the automaton not only in the body, but also in the spirit. It was the age of fascination with automata, still at work in Hoffmann, Poe, etc. What was at stake was the link between matter and spirit, nature and culture. The notion of the subject of the Enlightenment was all along an attempt to provide this link. This is what joins together its different facets: Locke's *tabula rasa*, *le bon sauvage*, *l'homme-nature*, Condillac's statue gradually acceding to the senses, the blind man—a major figure of the Enlightenment (cf. Molyneux's famous problem for which all the philosophers of the time proposed a solution, Diderot's *Letter on the Blind*, etc.; one could go so far as to say that the subject of the Enlightenment was blind), then Rousseau's *Emile* (who was an orphan), etc. What they all have in common is the quest for a "zero degree" of subjectivity, the missing link between nature and culture, the point where the spiritual would directly spring from the material. They all seem to aim at a subject beyond the imaginary, singularly deprived of a mirror phase, a nonimaginary subject from which the imaginary support in the world has to be taken away (this is particularly clear with the blind) in order to reconstruct it, in its true significance, from this "zero" point.

Frankenstein's creature demonstrates this in a particularly poignant way: it is the realization of the subject of the Enlightenment, the missing link produced by its scientific project. He is created, so to speak, *ex nihilo*, and he has to recreate the whole complexity of the spiritual world *ex nihilo*. And we have, in the most extraordinary central part of the book, a first-hand account of his

28. La Mettrie, *L'Homme-Machine* (Paris: Denoël Gonthier, 1981).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 143. It seems that the parallel was first established by Voltaire in 1738, some ten years before La Mettrie:

Le hardi Vaucanson, rival de Prométhée
Semblait, de la nature imitant les ressorts,
Prendre le feu des cieux pour aimer les corps.

subjectivation, a first-person narration of the passage from nature into culture. He is the zero point of natural subjectivity, and herein lies his paradox: as the embodiment of the natural zero state, he is counter to nature, a monster, excluded from nature and culture alike. Through his tragedy, culture only gets back its own message: his monstrosity is the monstrosity of culture. The noble savage, the self-educated man, turns bad only because the culture turns him down. By not accepting him society shows its corruption, its inability to integrate him, to include its own missing link. Culture judges by nature (that is, by his looks), not by culture (that is, by his good heart and sensitivity). The creature as the Unique only wants a social contract, but being refused one he wants to destroy the contract that excludes him and so to vindicate himself. Since he cannot found a family—a minimal contract with his like—he exterminates the family of his creator, who wouldn't recognize his offspring, his only link with culture. In the end all the figures of the novel are dead (except for Walton, who lives to tell the story).

The paradox of the creature lies in the fact that this embodiment of the subject of the Enlightenment directly disrupts its universe and produces its limit. The creature, that small extension of scientific endeavor, would fill the missing link and make it exist; it would bridge the gap. With its addition, "the great chain of being" would be complete; one could pass without a break from matter to spirit, from nature to culture. There was an empty space between the two that the monster comes to fill, but what we get with this continuous, full universe is the opposite of the traditional *horror vacui*; it is a *horror plenitudinis*, the horror of an unsplit world. Frankenstein brings to humanity, like Prometheus, the spark of life, but also much more: there is a promise to provide it with its origin, to heal the wound of castration, to make it whole again. But filling the lack is catastrophic—the Enlightenment reaches its limit by realizing it, just as the appearance of the double, in another context, produced the lack of lack.

The emergence of this limit of the Enlightenment is then open to a variety of interpretations. The religious one is closest to hand: Frankenstein, who interferes with God's business, has to be punished for his presumption and his rebellion against the divine order, the presumption and the rebellion of the Enlightenment itself, which has gone too far. But there is an opposite, romantic interpretation, a positive view of the monster, which not only exhibits a compassion for the inherent goodness of his nature betrayed by society, but also admires the sublimity of his horrible outlook—he appears against a background of spectacular natural scenery (Mont Blanc, the Arctics), along with its unfathomable wildness, being thus the embodiment of this other nature. Not the one written in mathematical language and that functions like clockwork, a mechanism, but the one that was lost with this mechanical scientific view of nature, the one that became the lost object of scientific endeavor and that can only be present as that effort to represent the unrepresentable, the Kantian definition

of the sublime. One can also see a political dimension in it: the story takes place at the time of the French Revolution, which was already labeled as "monstrous" by Burke (another theorist of the sublime) and which produced, in a whole generation of young English intellectuals and poets, a mixture of enthusiasm and horror. Mary Shelley was best placed to draw the consequences of this situation: both her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft as the "founder" of feminism and William Godwin as the "founder" of anarchism, placed themselves in a radical line of revolutionary demands—"Englishmen, one more effort"—to realize the revolutionary thrust, the effort paradoxically accomplished by their daughter. One could see in it the birth of the proletariat and the horror that provokes—and conservative discourse very soon took hold of the monster as a metaphor of workers' upheavals and demands, a personification of the mass, "the rule of the mob."³⁰

It is not that these interpretations are not correct; they are all plausible, and evidence can be found to support them. The point where the monster emerges is always immediately seized by an overwhelming amount of meaning—and that is valid for the whole subsequent gallery of monsters, vampires, aliens, etc. It has immediate social and ideological connotations. The monster can stand for everything that our culture has to repress—the proletariat, sexuality, other cultures, alternative ways of living, heterogeneity, the Other.³¹ There is a certain arbitrariness in the content that can be projected onto this point, and there are many attempts to reduce the uncanny to just this content. The important thing from a Lacanian point of view, however, is that while this content is indeed always present in the uncanny to a greater or a lesser degree, it doesn't constitute it. 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, and the criticism of ideology is caught in the same framework if it tries to reduce it to another kind of content or to make the content conscious and explicit. This criticism is always on the brink of a naive effort to fix things with their proper names, to make the unconscious conscious, to restore the sense of what is repressed and thus be rid of the uncanny. The constant resurgence of "right-wing" ideologies that find support in the uncanny always comes as a surprise—the fascination won't vanish, the historicization fails, the "hidden contents" do not exhaust it. Thus the criticism of ideology helplessly repeats the modernist gesture—the reduction of the uncanny to its "secular basis" through the very logic that actually produced the uncanny in the first place as the objectal remainder. Psychoanalysis doesn't provide a new and better interpretation of the uncanny; it maintains it as *a limit to interpretation*. Its interpretation tries to circumscribe the point where inter-

30. See Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1983).

31. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

pretation fails, where no “more faithful” translation can be made. It tries to pinpoint the dimension of the object in that tiny crack before different meanings get hold of it and saturate it with sense, the point that can never be successfully recuperated by the signifying chain. In other words, psychoanalysis differs from other interpretations by its insistence on the formal level of the uncanny rather than on its content.

Lacan’s specification that the best presentification of the object is the gaze doesn’t contradict this formal level of analysis. It seems that it names the object and thus assigns it a place, but the gaze in its formal structure is rather a device to open a “non-place,” the pure oscillation between an emptiness and a fullness. Frankenstein’s story again reveals this simply and efficiently. The principal source of the uncanniness of the monster, for Frankenstein, is precisely the gaze. It is the being of the gaze. The point that Frankenstein cannot endure, during the creation of the monster, is the moment when the creature opens its eyes, when the Thing renders the gaze—it is this opening that makes it the Thing. When seeing those “watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun-white sockets in which they were set,” Frankenstein runs away in horror.³² But the gaze comes to pursue him in his bedroom; the monster comes to his bedside—“his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were set on me.”³³ The emergence of this impossible subject is the emergence of the gaze—the opening of a hole in reality which is immediately also that which comes to fill it with an unbearable presence, with a being more being than being, *vacuum* and *plenitudo* all in one, the plenitude as the direct consequence of the emptiness. One could say that the monster’s terrible appearance is only a mask, an imaginary cover to provide a frame for his gaze. The same traumatic presence of the gaze can also be pinpointed in the second “primal scene,” the attempted creation of the monster’s bride in a Scottish cottage, the scene that is interrupted precisely because of the appearance of the gaze. It finishes with the announcement of the reappearance of the gaze in the third “primal scene”: “I shall be with you on your wedding-night.”³⁴ And he will. The bearer of the gaze will turn from a creature—that is, something created, an offspring, a son—into the figure of the father-*jouissance*.

The gaze that occurs with such precision in all the “primal scenes” of the novel is an impossible gaze. Jean-Jacques Lecercle has already pointed out that it is situated as the presence of the gaze at the subject’s own conception.³⁵ It emerges together with the emergence of the subject, in the moment of its conception, as an *hors-corps* and an *hors-sexe*. It is this object that would make

32. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, in *Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 318.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 438.

35. Lecercle, *Frankenstein*, p. 99.

the subject a *causa sui* if it could be integrated—the missing cause of subjectivity, the missing link of its emergence.

The Fantastic

Before concluding, let us consider briefly Tzvetan Todorov's "theory of the uncanny" in his classical analysis *The Fantastic*.³⁶ His account seems to come very close to the Lacanian one, yet it differs from it in the most important respect.

For Todorov, the main source of "the fantastic" (roughly the realm of the uncanny, to simplify matters) lies in an "intellectual uncertainty."³⁷ In Lacanian terms it is the eruption of the real in the midst of familiar reality; it provokes a hesitation and an uncertainty and the familiar breaks down. Of course this hesitation is structural—it affects the internal, implicit reader who is inscribed in the text, not the empirical or psychological one. For Todorov, in the last instance, the fantastic has to be explained and dissolved. The hesitation cannot be maintained indefinitely: either the unexplainable turns out to be just odd—the hero was deluded, mad, victim of a conspiracy, etc.—or the supernatural really exists, in which case we exchange our reality for another one with different rules (a mythical world, the world of fairy tales, etc.). In both cases, the real obtains a sense, it is allotted a meaning, and it thus evaporates. The uncanny could only subsist in the narrow middle ground that exists before the uncertainty as to its nature is dissipated. And it was only in that no-man's-land that it could produce anxiety and doom the subject to utter insecurity, to floating without a point of anchor. Todorov then admirably draws the implications of this simple starting point, shows a number of supplementary conditions that spring from it, and demonstrates it on a number of convincing examples.

The strength of this theory lies in its simplicity and especially in its purely formal character. It also offers an immediate link with the Lacanian view that the real can never be dealt with directly, that it emerges only in an oblique perspective, and that the attempt to grasp it directly makes it vanish. Nevertheless, one could say that this theory covers both too much and too little. Too much because its formal description applies also to a much broader area which one could call *the logic of suspense*. In its simplest form, it consists in the mechanism whereby an essential piece of information (e.g., the identity of the murderer) is withheld from the (implicit) reader and is disclosed only at the end. That delay makes the hero and the reader uncertain as to what is actually going on without necessarily producing the effect of the uncanny. Most detective and

36. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

37. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

crime fiction is based on this, but with the advance certainty that events will have a plausible natural explanation (the certainty embodied in that subject supposed to know, who is the detective).³⁸ Too little, since not only does it leave out a great number of instances of the fantastic, but also because, ultimately, the main source of the uncanny is not at all a hesitation or an uncertainty.

The instances not accounted for by this theory are easily found. A large part of “fantastic literature” has no intention of making the reader hesitate as to the true nature of events but is built on the assumption from the outset of a “supernatural” postulate. In *Frankenstein* we have to assume, for the duration of the narrative, the possibility of a “synthetic” production of “human” beings; in Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary*, to take a contemporary example, we find the possibility of the “resurrection of the dead” under certain conditions. Once we have accepted this hypothesis, no hesitation occurs, and yet those stories are definitely uncanny. The firm knowledge that “such things don’t normally occur” doesn’t diminish the uncanny effect. The question may then arise of why we are so easily inclined to swallow an improbable hypothesis that runs counter to all usual experience and be so easily duped into anxiety by horror.

In his book on jokes, Freud quotes Lichtenberg’s sentence: “Not only did he disbelieve in ghosts; he was not even frightened of them.”³⁹ Clearly, the uncertainty belonging to knowledge has to be distinguished from the area of unconscious belief. “I know very well, but all the same . . . I believe,” the formula so admirably pinpointed by Octave Mannoni in his classic paper, is at the basis of this fabrication of the uncanny.⁴⁰ The knowledge doesn’t contradict the belief, nor does the belief simply lose its force through knowledge, since it is fundamentally situated in relation to the object—which is not the object of knowledge.

We have a second, more basic distinction to make. The knowledge, and its (un)certainities, is to be distinguished from the terrible certainty on the level of the object. It is a certainty that goes beyond any certainty which science can provide, or better, it is only here that we reach the level of certainty, whereas science can only yield exactitude and remains subject to doubt, questioning, and proof. *Only the object can give certainty*, as it is only the object that provides one’s being. One can easily see this in good fantastic literature (or its modern version, “horror fiction”): the logic of its uncanniness is even directly opposed to the logic of suspense—what is horrible is that one knows in advance precisely what is bound to happen, and it happens. One could say that on this level the certainty

38. See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

39. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), *The Standard Edition*, vol. VIII, p. 92.

40. “Je sais bien . . . mais quand même,” in *Clefs pour L’Imaginaire ou L’Autre scène* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

is opposed to the unconscious belief as well. The fateful events seem unavoidable from the very outset, yet unconsciously one doesn't believe that the unavoidable will happen.⁴¹ So there is a passage from "I know very well . . . yet I believe" to "I don't really believe . . . yet I am certain." The mechanism of uncanniness doesn't leave you any space for uncertainty and hesitation. If there is a structural hesitation, or floating, attached to it, it comes from the impossibility of espousing the terrible certainty—it would ultimately entail psychosis, an annihilation of subjectivity. The apparent oscillation between knowledge and belief is rather a strategy of postponement to defer the encounter with the Thing (a strategy similar to obsessional neurosis). So for Todorov the fantastic comes from a lack of certainty and is dissipated when certainty is restored. From a Lacanian perspective the uncanny comes from too much certainty, when escape through hesitation is no longer possible, when the object comes too close.

Todorov deals with a well-circumscribed corpus of texts, a clearly cut realm of the fantastic. Its beginning coincides roughly with the advent of modernity and its scientific background; its closure, somewhat surprisingly, coincides with the advent of psychoanalysis: "Psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby made superfluous) the fantastic literature."⁴² What appeared indirectly through the fantastic can be dealt with directly by psychoanalysis. So psychoanalysis appears to be the most fantastic of all fantastic tales—the ultimate horror story.

Such a conclusion seems rather abrupt, but there is a sense in which one might agree. Psychoanalysis was the first to point out systematically the uncanny dimension pertaining to the very project of modernity, not in order to make it disappear, but in order to maintain it, to hold it open. It is true that modern literature had to develop other strategies to deal with it, as Todorov points out.⁴³ But what is currently called postmodernism—and this is one way to disentangle the growing confusion around this term—is a new consciousness about the uncanny as a fundamental dimension of modernity.⁴⁴ It doesn't imply a going beyond the modern, but rather an awareness of its internal limit, its split, which was there from the outset. Lacan's object *a* may be seen as its simplest and most radical expression.

41. See Žižek, *Looking Awry*, pp. 70–71.

42. Todorov, *The Fantastic*, pp. 168–69.

43. Todorov gives the paradigmatic example of Kafka's "Metamorphosis," where the source of the uncanny is actually the very absence of uncanny effects following any uncanny event: the supernatural is treated as natural, thus becoming "doubly" uncanny (p. 183). One could add that Joyce uses the inverse strategy in *Ulysses*: the very commonplace everyday events of an entirely "uneventful" day in Dublin are endowed with the dignity of the Thing by their complex treatment through language: the natural becomes "supernatural."

44. Again, it is contemporary popular culture that displays the greatest sensitivity to this shift by its insistence on and "working through" the "fundamental fantasies." The "return of the uncanny" currently appears to be its prevailing feature.