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The »Work« of the Uncanny

The »work« of the psychoanalyst, Freud writes in the opening paragraph of the »Uncanny«, has little to do with aesthetic theory. Unlike the art critic who seems to merely focus on beauty or the qualities of feelings, the psychoanalyst works in different strata of the mind. Perhaps one could even say that the art critic does not work at all, at least in the Freudian sense. His own interest in the uncanny he describes therefore and not surprisingly as a »remote one, and one which has been neglected in the specialist literature of aesthetics«.[1]

»Work« is not only one of the first words that Freud uses to define and distinguish the task of the psychoanalyst, it also appears to be one of the most recurring ones throughout his essay. A minor term, as it were, and surely used with different connotations, it is nonetheless noteworthy for its sheer abundance: The psychoanalyst »works«; in the novella of his analysis, Hoffmann's *Sandman*, Nathaniel observes how his father and the mysterious houseguest Coppelius »work« together »at a brazier with open flames«[2], how both are engaged in »handiwork«[3]; Freud describes the »clock-work«[4] of the automaton Olympia, and he mentions that Nathaniel is afraid that Coppelius might »work on him as a mechanic would on a doll«[5]; he writes about »mechanical processes that are at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity«[6]; refers to the »working of forces« which the layman suspects behind cases of epilepsy and madness; and the mental apparatus' »modes of working«.[7] And Freud mentions the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ewald Hering, Ernst Jentsch, William Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Wilhelm Hauff, Oscar Wilde, the New Testament, and Arthur Schnitzler, in no particular order. And, of course, there are his own works.[8] James Strachey, the editor of Freud's works, reminds us of a letter to

Sándor Ferenczi from May 1919 in which Freud mentioned that the work was almost complete – his essay on the »Uncanny«, that is.

One should probably note the polysemy of the term »work« with some concern and not try to build an argument on such an ambiguous word. Freud writes about labor, mental work, and the written works of various authors, to mention just a few of the connotations. But for each of these different meanings he uses the same word: »Arbeit«.[9] And since Freud's essay on the uncanny is all about ambiguities, one has reason to be curious as to whether a common core or nucleus can be found in Freud's use of the word »work«, and if Freud's own approach that he develops in his essay could prove useful in uncovering such a common core.

Freud explains that the work of a psychoanalyst can take on two different forms. Either one finds out which »meaning has come to be attached« to a word in the course of its history – in the case of his essay the ›uncanny‹[10] –, or one collects the instances, anecdotes and experiences which are associated with it. Two different approaches, as it were, that this essay will seek to adopt.

The first method, the attempt to distill the common core of a word or concept from the history of the word itself, famously prompted Freud to begin his essay with rather extensive quotes from various dictionaries, passages so lengthy that Freud's editor apologetically described them as »preliminary obstacles« that would hopefully not discourage Freud's readers from reading his essay to the end.[11] In Freud's view these extensive quotes are crucial, because specialists had previously neglected the nucleus of his analysis – the uncanny – and because the actual meaning of a word »is not always used in a clearly definable sense«.[12] His meticulous account of the history of the uncanny also indicates why the word may have been misinterpreted for such a long time. The uncanny has been used in so many variations, yet its synonyms did not fully capture its true meaning. As Freud writes, one has to »expect that a special kind of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. One is curious to what this common core is which allows us to distinguish as ›uncanny‹ certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening«.[13] But the true problem of the failed attempts to find such a common core

was the false understanding of its literal meaning. In fact, what one tends to understand as a term's given meaning, its denotation or literal sense, is a rather late development in the term's history of usage. According to Freud, the denotation is not at all a word's given meaning, it is entirely dependent on a specific epistemological context. With respect to *Heimlichkeit* Freud writes: »Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich. Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich.* Let us bear this discovery in mind, though we cannot yet rightly understand it, alongside Schelling's definition of the *Unheimlich.* If we go on to examine individual instances of uncanniness, these hints will become intelligible to us.«[14] In other words, the literal meaning is a late development, which can only become apparent if one is willing to see that the denotation of the word is actually a connotation.

Freud's essay on the »Uncanny« may be his most extensive consultation of etymological dictionaries, but it is not an isolated incident. The habit of including lengthy references from dictionaries in his writings, together with equally verbose apologies for their comprehensive citation, is in fact one of the most significant stylistic features of his work. Think of his short essay on the »Gegensinn der Urworte«, »On the Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words«, first published in 1910. In a similar fashion as the »Uncanny« from 1919, the essay illustrates that the determination of a word's ›literal meaning‹ is a late development of Western culture. In the various studies and dictionaries from which he quotes, this becomes quite evident. The main sources of Freud's argument are essays by Karl Abel's, his *Sprachwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen* from 1884, studies that draw extensively on Egyptian sources, among other things, explaining that in Early Egypt it was quite common for words to have two meanings: one positive, the other negative. Light used to mean darkness, for example; strong could also signify weak, and young could be used for old.[15] In the Egyptian hieroglyphs certain determinative signs were used to communicate which of the antonyms was intended. Abel argues that it was only much later that this ambivalence disappeared and the originally binary words split into two opposing ones, each of them