3 The Uncanny: Freud, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe

Freud's paper 'The Uncanny' is the best essay on the subject. It was written in 1919, when he was also working on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and it shares with that work a new breadth of vision. Previously Freud's ingenuity had been directed to the task of explaining what pleasure was to be gained, or what pain avoided, from behaviour that appeared to have no motive, or that disguised its motive. In addition, his task was to show that however bizarre the behaviour, pleasure was pursued (or pain avoided) in the most economical manner possible, given the divisions and tensions within the mind. Now, in acknowledging the repetition compulsion, Freud identified a principle of mental functioning which defied the pleasure principle.

The repetition principle is ‘beyond’ the pleasure principle in two senses. First, it is prior to it but does not contradict it: the mind works over—or endeavours to work over — some original impression in order to master its evocative anxiety and thereby convert the tension into pleasure. Secondly, the repetition principle is actually inconsistent with the pleasure principle: it is an effort to restore a psychic state that is developmentally primitive and marked by the drainage of energy in accord with the death instinct. This recognition led Freud to revise the assumption that two fundamental, and related, sets of instincts were at work: libidinal and self-preservation, which subsequently were suggested to be only libidinal, since self-preservation could be classified as a libidinal instinct by describing it as the libido directed towards the self. He now postulated a second duality of instincts, the libidinal and death instincts. The death instinct was defined as the impulse to return to a prior developmental phase — the inorganic state; and this instinct could take on an aggressive drive when it was deflected from the self on to others.

*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* stands out in Freud’s writings as his most overtly speculative and poetic vision, yet the repetition compulsion supposed to be at the basis of the death instinct and its link to traumatic
dreams, to games and to art became the bedrock of Freud’s later theories. The mind had to protect itself from stimuli; repetition was an attempt to reduce the level of excitation in ideas or emotions; it was a means of preparation, allowing the psyche to meet challenges or surprises in a comfortable low key. How strange, then, that the principle of repetition should become the means by which Freud explains that literature which so clearly aims at increasing excitement and surprise and confusion.

Freud begins the essay on the uncanny with his customary apology for broaching aesthetic matters by saying that psychoanalysis ‘has little to do with the subdued emotional impulses which, inhibited in their aims and dependent upon a host of concurrent factors, usually furnish the material for the study of aesthetics.’ He declares, therefore, that he will treat only a neglected and remote aspect of the aesthetics of the uncanny. As is also his custom, he proceeds, ignoring his diffident approach, to discuss the subject as a whole. He asks what it is that distinguishes the uncanny from the fearful or, rather, how it can be defined as a special class of the fearful. The uncanny, he concludes, belongs to that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known by us or felt by us: in short, the uncanny, or strange, actually points to the recurrence of something very familiar, but repressed or discarded.

The German word Freud is considering is unheimlich — literally unhomely, unfamiliar; but it can also mean the opposite — secret, hidden. For that which is familiar to oneself, or belonging to one’s home, can be hidden from others and therefore secret, unfamiliar and strange (e.g., private parts). The ambiguity of meaning indicates the type of familiarity and the type of strangeness the term is used to describe, and emphasises the reason for the strangeness: the prefix ‘un-’ is the sign for repression.

Freud continues the study of uncanny phenomena with a discussion of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sand-Man’ and in so doing provides one of his most satisfying discussion of a literary work in which psychoanalytic biography, often grossly speculative and psychologically naïve, is reduced to a suggestive coda. Freud believes that Nathanael’s uncertainty as to Olympia’s status — whether she is a mannikin or a woman — is derived from the child’s supposition that dolls are alive; and though this supposition may be based upon wish or desire rather than fear, the fact that it is a discarded belief or fantasy which later recurs, renders it uncanny. Freud believes, however, that this theme is incidental to the tale and far less striking than the central notion of having one’s eyes plucked out.

It is known that this can be a terrible childhood fear; and a study of