



Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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Enstranged Strangers: OOO, the Uncanny, and the Gothic

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Abstract: Exploring the links between Speculative Realism, psychoanalysis, and literary criticism, this article examines OOO's entanglement with the 'uncanny'. Reading OOO against three notable treatments of the concept - Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The 'Uncanny'", Ernst Jentsch's 1906 paper "On the Psychology of the Uncanny", and Martin Heidegger's discussion of uncanniness in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953) - it argues that OOO reconfigures the 'uncanny' as a profoundly ontological concept premised on aesthetic enstrangement. Using E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" as a case study, it assesses what the consequences of this reconfiguration are for literary criticism and, in particular, the study of the Gothic. By splicing OOO into the history and practice of Gothic scholarship, this article traces the outline of an "object-oriented uncanny", pushing the 'uncanny' out of Freud's shadow and into the "great outdoors".

Keywords: Speculative Realism; Ontology; E.T.A. Hoffmann; Literary Theory; Freud; Jentsch; Heidegger; Phenomenology; Psychoanalysis

1 Orientation

The 'uncanny'.¹ What is it? The return of the repressed perhaps, as Sigmund Freud argued, or a more general "psychical uncertainty", as Ernst Jentsch, Freud's precursor, maintained? Or does uncanniness signal a more primordial ontological state, a Heideggerian "not-at-homeness" at the heart of Dasein? Or perhaps something else? The uncanny appears with remarkable frequency in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) - so far the most fecund branch of Speculative Realism (SR) - especially in the work of Timothy Morton, whose notion of the "strange stranger" seems to condense many of its precepts. And yet, while Morton has written on aesthetic concepts as vast as beauty and the sublime in terms of OOO, the uncanny has remained largely - though not entirely - unexamined, repeatedly used for its shadowy and evocative power, but formally unsystematised into OOO's strange logics. It may yet prove to be affiliated in some way with the sublime. Indeed, Harold Bloom, the divisive literary critic and self-appointed gate-keeper of the Western literary canon, once made the surprising claim that Sigmund Freud's famous essay on the uncanny was "the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the sublime".² Bloom aside, the nebulous use of the uncanny in OOO is perhaps due to the fact that it is a notoriously opaque phenomenon, irreconcilable with "systems" at the best of times. This does not mean, however, that it should be ignored. While it may seem an oblique and ephemeral phenomenon to philosophy in general,

¹ In an effort to contain the concept, like shielding around radioactive material, the uncanny is often placed in quotation marks. In order to let the uncanny fully irradiate things, I will no longer do so except when quoting others.

² Bloom, "Freud and the Sublime", 182.

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the uncanny has had a profound impact in at least one particular field of study, namely, literary criticism, and an even greater role in the study of what might be termed, loosely, the Gothic.

The following essay, then, hazards a return to the uncanny. The aforementioned triad of thinkers, Freud, Jentsch, and Heidegger, together with their respective schools of thought - psychoanalysis and phenomenology - form its conceptual bedrock, and must be worked through in turn, and yet, for reasons that should become clear, OOO takes the uncanny into territory hitherto uncharted by these thinkers.³ While an object-oriented understanding of the uncanny will therefore be, by necessity, explorative, if not speculative, the uncanny as it appears in the works of Morton and Graham Harman (and others) does not repudiate previous explications of the uncanny so much as emerge from their points of contact. This is not a claim that the uncanny has any kind of technical status in OOO or that one can trace a line of direct influence from the material discussed here to the workings of OOO. Still less is it an exhaustive or genealogical account of every theory of the uncanny. The uncanny has simply been caught up, as much else has, in the various projects of OOO, and, through use, has evolved in line with OOO's general philosophical and aesthetic prerogatives.

This paper explores just what this evolution involves, but also what it entails. In doing so, it puts OOO in a dialogue with literary studies and, in particular, the study of the Gothic. By shining an eldritch light on the uncanny, OOO, I argue, provokes us to read Gothic narratives in new ways. The "Gothic", of course, is itself a problematic and contested term. From the Sack of Rome in 410 C.E. by the Visigoths to contemporary Goth subculture(s), the Gothic has an almost two-thousand-year history and can be used to describe, at the very least, an architecture, music, fashion, literature, and cinema. Indeed, this range - conceptual as much as historical - suggests that the Gothic is not any one thing so much as a (continually evolving) genre, mode, tradition, or style. As the following paper is concerned principally with Gothic literature, it will suffice to define the Gothic as a genre concerned with "darkness" - understood in an open and ambiguous way - and which tends to deal in the supernatural, a fear of (or encounter with) the "other", and excessive or extreme emotions (like terror, horror, and anxiety). Of course, in order to understand how OOO reads the Gothic, a Gothic text with a clear preoccupation with the uncanny is required. For reasons that shall become clear, that text is E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" ("*Der Sandmann*") from his 1817 volume *The Night Pieces* (*Die Nachtstücke*).⁴

In his monograph on the uncanny, Nicholas Royle warns that to write about the concept is "to engage with a hydra".⁵ And yet, "this is no reason to give up trying: examples of the uncanny get tangled up with one another, critical distinctions and conclusions become vertiginously difficult, but they are still necessary".⁶ The following is an attempt to engage this hydra once more. We may lose - a new head grows as one is removed - but win or lose, there is, it is hoped, much that can be learned in the attempt.

2 In a Glass, Darkly

In his short but thought-provoking book, *The World of Failing Machines: Speculative Realism and Literature* (2016), Grant Hamilton faults OOO for its "fetishization of the 'weird' or 'uncanny'",⁷ claiming that "such concentration on the weird in literature is hardly something upon which a new literary criticism can rest".⁸

³ Jentsch is more properly tied to psychology than psychoanalysis, but as the latter was an offshoot of the former, they are sufficiently aligned, for the purposes of this paper, as to be conflated.

⁴ While "The Sandman" is used here as being, in some sense, representative of the Gothic, clearly no single text can contain or stand in for an entire genre. Understood historically, "The Sandman" speaks to a notably Germanic and Romantic trajectory of the Gothic, one not entirely aligned with the British tradition and its subsequent developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That said, Hoffmann, like E.A. Poe, influenced much of what came after, including, as shall be seen, Freud's thinking on the uncanny. Hopefully, the reader will find Hoffmann's story to be, at the very least, Gothic *enough*, when judged by the above definition, to support the arguments of this paper.

⁵ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Hamilton, *The World of Failing Machines*, 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

And there is certainly a great deal of truth in this. There is patently more to literature than the uncanny, and more that Graham Harman's model of reality - "ontography" - can be applied to. Indeed, Harman has addressed several other areas in his own work, including, most notably, love and humour.⁹ Even so, it is, at the very least, intriguing that so many SR philosophers have shown such an interest in fictions of the weird, the uncanny, and the supernatural. The term "ontography" itself is lifted, as Harman is quick to acknowledge, from a story by the English academic and ghost story writer, M.R. James. More intriguing still, is that Harman should have brought his philosophy to bear on the prose fiction of two canonical American exponents of the Gothic, H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe; the former being, for Harman, not just a remarkable writer, but the "poet laureate of object-oriented philosophy".¹⁰

Indeed, reflecting on the original 2007 "Speculative Realism" conference held at Goldsmiths, University of London, Harman notes that "although the four original Speculative Realists do not share a single philosophical hero in common, all of us turned out independently to have been admirers of Lovecraft",¹¹ and few would contest that SR betrays a preoccupation with the horrific. In *After Finitude* (2006, Eng. 2008), Quentin Meillassoux describes the outside of thought, or "hyper-chaos", as a kind of cosmic monstrosity: "a rather menacing power - something insensible, and capable of destroying both things and worlds."¹² Ray Brassier epigraphs his remorseless treatise on nihilism, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), with a line from one of the foremost living horror writers, Thomas Ligotti, and, indeed, provides the forward to Ligotti's own work of nonfiction, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2010). Ben Woodard applies Ian Hamilton Grant's reading of Friedrich Schelling to Lovecraft in his "Thinking against Nature: Nature, Ideation, and Realism between Lovecraft and Schelling" (2010). Timothy Morton dubs his object-oriented ecological programme "Dark Ecology", and the site of this ecology the "Spectral Plain". Dylan Trigg fleshes out the coordinates of an "unhuman" phenomenology in his 2014 book *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*, while Eugene Thacker traverses a plethora of supernatural fictions - from the middle-ages to the present day - while ruminating on the "world-without-us" in his three-volume treatise, *Horror of Philosophy* (2011-2015).

More might be added here, but even this list is remarkable. In the emphatic words of Anthony Morgan: "horror and existential dread in the face of the real emerge as the defining moods of post-correlationist philosophy!"¹³ Certainly, SR seems to have an affinity for genre studies, and it is notable that the only two studies with an explicitly literary-critical focus in Edinburgh University Press's dedicated SR range - the only university press to have such a range - are on Romanticism and Science-fiction respectively.¹⁴ If there is a genre that sutures Romanticism and Science-fiction, it is, undoubtedly, the Gothic. Perhaps, then, while the weird and the uncanny might make for loose foundations to literary criticism *in toto*, they may yet prove fruitful philosophical coordinates for the study of the Gothic.

This claim requires more evidence than can be marshalled in a single article, and, indeed, the following is an offshoot of a larger project in applied OOO and the Gothic. In order to do any sort of justice to this question, then, a narrower focus is needed. As already intimated, this article unearths two subjects in particular for autopsy: psychoanalysis and phenomenology, and dissects, for comparison, a single rarefied organ from these bodies: the uncanny. For Gothic studies, the uncanny is primarily a psychoanalytic concept, sourced from Sigmund Freud's remarkable 1919 essay "*Das 'Unheimliche'*" ("The 'Uncanny'"). OOO might also be said to owe some of its uncanny energies to Freudian psychoanalysis, and Freud does liken the division between the conscious and the unconscious mind to the Kantian split between the phenomenal and the noumenal - suggesting, at the outset, some shared ground between psychoanalysis and OOO.¹⁵ As shall be seen, however, I find Freud's forerunner in matters of the uncanny, Ernst Jentsch, a more useful precursor on this point. However, OOO's greatest intellectual debt (at least in Harman's iteration of OOO),

⁹ For love, see *Dante's Broken Hammer*; for humour, see *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 125-144.

¹⁰ Harman, *Weird Realism*, 32. See, also, "On the Horror of Phenomenology" and "Poe's Black Cat".

¹¹ Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, 91.

¹² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 64.

¹³ Morgan, "Introduction", 26.

¹⁴ See Gottlieb, *Romantic Realities*, and Willems, *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*.

¹⁵ Freud, "The Unconscious", 171.

is to phenomenology. As such, this article also explores a road less travelled, and re-appraises Martin Heidegger's cryptic notion of *unheimlichkeit*, or the uncanniness of being.

To discuss the uncanny in the context of Gothic studies is, as mentioned, to invoke psychoanalysis, and something must be said on the history of these two interconnected fields; psychoanalysis is, after all, a regular feature in introductory books on the Gothic, from David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* (1980) and Fred Botting's *Gothic* (1996), to more recent works like Jarlath Killeen's *Gothic Literature, 1825-1914* (2009) and Nick Groom's *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (2012). However, before moving on to an analysis of the uncanny proper, it is worth mentioning that Freudian psychoanalysis has played a relatively minor role in SR thus far. Brassier addresses Freud's notion of the "death drive" or "primordial pull back towards the inorganic" at the close of *Nihil Unbound*.¹⁶ Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects* (2011) draws on psychoanalytic paradigms, but is almost exclusively Lacanian. Grant Hamilton goes so far as to designate Freud a "speculative-realist literary critic"¹⁷, and Freud's essay, with its prolonged analysis of texts (as opposed to case-studies), lends some credence to this claim. Harman is likewise sympathetic to Freud in his *Guerrilla Metaphysics*,¹⁸ but notes that "we will have to bypass the topic of dreams despite its obviously promising connection with two of our central topics, simply because a reading of Freud in terms of Object-Oriented Philosophy would require more than a few pages".¹⁹ He has recently supplied a few more of these pages in an article on the famous "wolf-man" case from a OOO perspective,²⁰ but the book linking the two fields is, as of yet, still unwritten. Remediating this deficit is also beyond the remit of this article. Freud's output was prodigious and a synoptic assessment of his writings through an object-oriented lens would likely require book-length treatment. Conversely, the labour of reading the Gothic through the lens of psychoanalysis is, for the most part, a *fait accompli*, and so can be stated more readily.

We should begin by noting that Freudian psychoanalysis has a venerable history in Gothic studies. Being coextensive with the rich outpouring of Gothic literature at the *fin de siècle*, critics have long been interested in their historical and thematic interplay. As Michelle Massé puts it in a canonical essay on the topic: "if the Gothic can be said to influence psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis in its turn illuminates the Gothic".²¹ Massé is quick to stress, however, that "neither the Gothic nor psychoanalysis is the other's oedipal child".²² Even so, psychoanalysis's detailed treatment of dreams, neuroses, doubles, returns, familial configurations, taboos, and drives - all bound to the inscrutable machinations of the "unconscious" - are certainly recurrent staples of Gothic fiction. Nor are they bound to the historical horizons of psychoanalysis as a practice. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) - often touted as the very first Gothic novel - features many of these issues and was purported, moreover, to have been inspired by a dream.²³ Replete with dungeons, maidens, prophecies, filicide, blood lines, and all manner of supernatural histrionics, Walpole's frenzied reverie of medieval villainy and comeuppance is merely the first in a genre that is now more popular and populous than it has ever been. Moreover, the nature of the psyche or ego and, of course, its *collapse*, is undoubtedly one of the defining features of Gothic fiction throughout all its epochal permutations. From Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1839) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) in the nineteenth century, to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* (2000) in the twentieth and twenty first, almost every work of terror engages at some level with the mental state of its characters or readership (or both).

It should come as no surprise, then, that psychoanalysis, as an approach to literature, has had a disproportionate influence in Gothic studies. This influence can be traced back to David Punter's inaugural

¹⁶ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 235.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *The World of Failing Machines*, 26.

¹⁸ "A *fortiori*, we gain more energy from reading Freud than from the numerous complaints of his denigrators. This is [...] because [his] style has a trace of that moral authority that comes from grappling honestly with the contours of things, rather than the pious official authority that comes from merely denouncing the hypocrisy of others" (236).

¹⁹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 125.

²⁰ Harman, "Freud's Wolf-Man in an Object-Oriented Light".

²¹ Massé, "Psychoanalysis and the Gothic", 230.

²² *Ibid.*, 231.

²³ Walpole, "Walpole to William Cole, 9 March 1765", 88.

study, *The Literature of Terror*, a work which not only established the Gothic as a viable field of study (in the form of Romanticism's dark underbelly), but established it along notably Freudian lines. In fact, Punter suggests that the Gothic genre *qua* genre may have emerged, at least in part, precisely as a means of working through trauma;²⁴ a way of safeguarding the mind against its own dissolution, a world in which, paradoxically, "terror guards our sanity".²⁵ By this account, the emergence of the Gothic genre was not simply a cultural response to the crushing weight of the Enlightenment's enforcement of "reason" - its tumultuous imagery gleaned from the "terror" of the French Revolution - but something like a defence mechanism intrinsic to the Enlightenment itself, a reflex of the era's unconscious.

This is not to say, of course, that the study of the Gothic has been immune to the wax and wane of new critical and theoretical approaches to literary studies. Indeed, and perhaps by dint of its grounding in a psychoanalytic mode, Gothic scholarship has always been especially amenable to "theory", from poststructuralism to posthumanism and everything in-between. Indeed, for many, Gothic scholarship is *defined* by its fundamental polyvalence; "Gothic criticism sees the Gothic as a monster defined by ambiguity".²⁶ For others, "theory" leaves a bad taste in the mouth, producing, at best, naively a-contextual or a-political readings and, at worst, wildly obfuscating, circular, or self-fulfilling "analyses". The humanities-wide curative to theory's wanton abandon (arriving, or returning, just as poststructuralism entered its decadence) has centred on historicism, understood as the patient work of fitting a text ever more snugly into its historical or biographical contexts. The result is that most literary criticism is now literary historicism, and Gothic scholarship is, correspondingly, very much in the throes of a historicist paradigm.

For theoretical approaches to the Gothic, and psychoanalytic readings in particular, the hammer blow, or *malleus theoria*, came in the form of Robert Mighall and Chris Baldick's still-controversial essay, "Gothic Criticism" (2000). This polemic, impressive in its invective, sets out to demolish what the pair see as "seventy years" of "radically misguided" scholarship.²⁷ Their primary target here is what they dub the "anxiety model" of Gothic scholarship, a Freudian approach which "employs a model of culture and history premised on fear, experienced by a surrealist caricature of a bourgeoisie trembling in their frock coats at each and every deviation from a rigid, but largely mythical, stable middle-class consensus".²⁸ In this model, "the metaphorical is given more weight than the literal, the psychological more than the historical, and the hidden and symbolic more than the ostensible".²⁹ The result of all this, they claim, is that "Gothic Criticism now functions as a 'Gothic' form of discourse in its own right, compelled to reproduce what it fails to understand".³⁰

We will return to this suggestive claim shortly, but as much subsequent scholarship has pointed out, Baldick and Mighall buy too strongly into the "objectivity" of their own approach, forgetting that, to quote Morton out of context, "ideas always come bundled with ways of having those ideas",³¹ and that historicist studies are often a kind of fiction in their own right, plotted and paced accordingly, with their own narrative threads and *dramatis personae*. More generally, historicism's chief draw-back, for OOO, is its catalytic propensity to surreptitiously shift significance from text to context, with the former meaningful only in so far as it proves or bolsters the respective historical narrative the critic subscribes to or are, themselves, fashioning. For the object-oriented critic, historicism is an endeavour in (mis)translation, an attempt to contain the explosion of objects that constitute history - Walter Benjamin's "pile of debris" - by reifying the explosion itself.³² Those familiar with OOO will recognise this kind of contextualism as an instance of what Harman terms "overmining" - the reduction of an object upward to its relations, actions, or effects.³³

²⁴ Punter, *Literature of Terror*, Vol. 1, 112.

²⁵ Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", 345.

²⁶ Killeen, "Gothic Literature", 168.

²⁷ Baldick and Mighall, "Gothic Criticism", 209.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

³¹ Morton, *Humankind*, 114.

³² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 249.

³³ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 9-11.

However, returning to the pair's claim that psychoanalytic-inflected Gothic criticism "now functions as a 'Gothic' form of discourse in its own right, compelled to reproduce what it fails to understand",³⁴ we find that psychoanalysis is not the only theory to have been contaminated by the Gothic; poststructuralism falls to the same infection. Julian Wolfreys, for example, acknowledges that the Derridian approach he musters in *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny, and Literature* (2002), "is itself a gothic narrative, concerned with constant returns, uncanny disturbances, dismembered remains and improper forms, deferrals and differences".³⁵ Likewise, Mark Edmundson, writing during poststructuralism's high water mark in the late 1990s, suggests that "much, though surely not all, of what is called theory draws on Gothic idioms".³⁶ His targets here are Freud and Derrida but also, and perhaps more surprisingly, Slavoj Žižek and Michel Foucault as well.³⁷ Indeed, as Nick Groom notes in his introductory book on the Gothic, "much contemporary critical theory is effectively Gothic writing".³⁸ With its "fetishization of the 'weird' or 'uncanny'",³⁹ and its ghostly mechanics and metaphors of withdrawal, OOO is also, I suggest, a Gothic theory. However, rather than assert, as Baldick and Mighall do, that Gothic scholarship just got off on the wrong foot, and that this peculiar phenomenon - the *Gothicisation* of criticism - should simply be excised from history and scholarship alike, trimmed away like so much necrotic flesh, it should instead be taken as evidence that there is something about the Gothic that distorts the methodologies used to understand it - affecting how we talk about and critique it.

In this sense, psychoanalysis is one example of a larger phenomenon, of which OOO is an heir apparent. This is not a claim about the "truth" of either OOO or psychoanalysis, but a claim as to their gravitational entanglements with genre. As a clinical practice, Freudian psychoanalysis has, over time, been superseded by modern cognitive psychology, and despite its lingering influence in Gothic studies, the entire psychoanalytic edifice is now often considered to be less a framework for unearthing the hidden subtexts of Gothic stories, or the latent traumas of their characters - or, indeed, the compulsions and drives of their authors and readership - but as itself a species of Gothic writing; "part of a longer tradition of the Gothic dethronement of the Enlightenment subject".⁴⁰

This historically exploded view turns Freud into a Gothic author and psychoanalysis into a Gothic text. But this is not a problem for the object-oriented critic. If, as OOO claims, aesthetics is first philosophy,⁴¹ then there is much to be gained in the study of aesthetic objects, and aligning aesthetics *qua* "art" with aesthetics *qua* "causal relations" opens an aperture through which, as Morton puts it, "the skills of the literary critic and the architect, the painter and the actor, the furniture maker and the composer, the musician and the software designer can be brought to bear on the workings of causality".⁴²

3 The Uncanny

This whistle-stop history of the relationship between Gothic studies and "theory" has, it is hoped, outlined some of what is at stake here. But what about the uncanny, where does it fit in to this? The uncanny is problematic. Both the term and its meanings, as they are generally understood and applied in contemporary discourse, are drawn from Freud's now-canonical essay "*Das Unheimliche*" or "The 'Uncanny'" (1919). Strictly untranslatable, the "meaning" of *das unheimliche* is as paradoxical as it is protean. It is typically figured as that unsettling sense of the unhomey or unfamiliar *within* the homely or familiar, or vice-versa: animation in something thought to be inanimate, misrecognising one's own reflection, and so on. The term is

³⁴ Baldick and Mighall, "Gothic Criticism", 221.

³⁵ Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, 10.

³⁶ Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 40.

³⁷ Edmundson attributes this to Foucault's notion of Power - a "haunting agency [...] as evanescent and insistent as a resourceful spook" (41).

³⁸ Groom, *The Gothic*, xiv.

³⁹ Hamilton, *The World of Failing Machines*, 108.

⁴⁰ Luckhurst, "Psychoanalysis", 527.

⁴¹ Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy", 21-30.

⁴² Morton, *Realist Magic*, 76.

now closely related, if not half-synonymous, with the strange, the eerie, the terrifying and the disquieting.⁴³ Its conceptual slipperiness has made it, in more recent times, a handy weapon in the poststructuralist's arsenal. In *Victorian Hauntings*, Julian Wolfreys explicitly aligns the uncanny with Jacques Derrida's notion of "spectrality", and Nicholas Royle's remarkable monograph, *The Uncanny* (2003), is a polymorphously perverse concatenation of uncanniness unabashedly indebted to poststructuralism's emphasis on "play".

In its poststructural or postmodern guise, then, the uncanny has come to represent precisely that which resists or frustrates "systems", fixity, definition or explanation and has, for this very reason, become a loose and general term used either as a playful synonym for anything remotely "spooky" or, more troublingly, as an empty cypher or device - an ambiguous signifier signifying ambiguity. This is not to say that the uncanny is or can be made unambiguous or is not conceptually linked to ambiguity, and both Wolfreys' and Royle's studies offer admirably nuanced readings. Nor is this to disavow what is essentially a truism in matters of the uncanny - that the problem of defining its meaning, operation or effect only *increases* with analysis. Perhaps, as Punter writes, "there is not, can never be a theory of the uncanny, even if there might be ideas about it".⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the strategic misuse of the term must be carefully avoided if a useful and coherent image of the uncanny is to be summoned. And while the uncanny has always been problematic to come to terms with, it has not always been so deliberately vague. The history of the uncanny is a history of returns, with each new cultural or intellectual moment co-opting or reinventing its uncertainties to suit the needs of changing cultural or theoretical zeitgeists, the present study included. But this does not entail that the uncanny is a blank signifier or empty concept. It has a strange and tenebrous reality, but a reality nonetheless. For Freud, it is closely linked to dread, horror and the general field of what is frightening, and yet is in some sense separate, deserving a "special conceptual term".⁴⁵

This brings us squarely to Freud. Any discussion or invocation of the uncanny is drawn inexorably back to Freud. His essay is ubiquitous. In the humanities, there is not so much a concept of the uncanny as there is *Freud's* concept of the uncanny. It is, in a sense, obligatory to begin with Freud. Beginnings, however, seem only to emphasise the difficulty of coming to terms with the concept. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis does provide, if not *the* origin, at least *an* origin; a point of entry (and departure). From Ernst Jentsch to Sigmund Freud and through, even, to Jacques Lacan, the uncanny has solidified as a concept inseparable from human psychology; manifesting, most famously, as a symptom and symbol of oedipal configurations. This is, as suggested, not the conclusion that this paper reaches, but it is necessary to start here.

"The 'Uncanny'" is a notoriously stuttering and contradictory piece of writing. In her landmark 1976 essay, the feminist philosopher and critic Hélène Cixous describes it as "less a discourse than a strange theoretical novel",⁴⁶ one that "proceeds as its own metaphor".⁴⁷ "The 'Uncanny'" is itself uncanny; it performs its own subject matter. It is not simply the study of an aesthetic phenomenon, but an aesthetic object in its own right. And it is telling that this should be the case for, as shall be seen, it is precisely Freud's concern with locating and explaining the uncanny as it arises in *fiction* that defines his theory. Perhaps it is for this reason that a feeling of ambiguity can be found to varying degrees in almost every critical engagement with "The 'Uncanny'" for the last fifty years. Any analysis of the *unheimliche*, Cixous tells us, "is itself an *Un*, a mark of repression and the dangerous vibration of the *Heimliche*".⁴⁸

One of the most significant of these "Un-" readings in recent years, and certainly the one most concerned with the strange resonances of the *heimliche's* "vibrations" across academia, is Anneleen Masschelein's comprehensive study *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth Century Theory* (2011). Rather than grappling with what the uncanny "really is" or how it occurs or is experienced, Masschelein traces a genealogy of the uncanny *qua* concept since Freud. This "functionalist-discursive" cartography of the concept

⁴³ Mark Fisher's book, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), has gone some way in refuting this claim by drawing sharper distinctions between the uncanny and its related terms. Of course, that such a book should be necessary only highlights the hegemony of the concept's current indeterminacy.

⁴⁴ Punter, "Shape and Shadow", 194.

⁴⁵ Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", 339.

⁴⁶ Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms", 525.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 545.

maps its various conceptualizations, discursive roles and moments of marginality and canonization across various cultural and theoretical domains.⁴⁹ By charting its numerous appropriations in this way, Masschelein establishes the uncanny as a concept formed “by repetition rather than by definition”.⁵⁰ This discovery grounds her central thesis that “*the Freudian uncanny is a late-twentieth century theoretical concept*”.⁵¹ In other words, for Masschelein, the (Freudian) uncanny is a retroactive concept; a notion with little conceptual status in Freud’s *oeuvre* that came to be “activated” by the needs of late-twentieth-century theory.⁵²

As an historical or genealogical study, Masschelein’s account is remarkable and unlikely to be superseded for many years, if at all. However, as Masschelein herself acknowledges, in attending only to the genealogical, her study bypasses the provision of an explanatory content for the uncanny. It may prove that one comes at the cost of the other, and that the gesture of “explaining” the uncanny must always to some extent disavow or exclude significant facets of its historical past and interdisciplinary drift. The reverse of the coin being that, to accurately account for this history necessarily invokes a sterilizing critical distance, a de-conceptualisation in which to survive the contortions of its evolution, the uncanny is transformed into a malleable yet internally vacuous “unconcept”. Therefore, unlike Masschelein’s exhaustive genealogy of Freud’s essay and its re-readings, the following sections attempt to come to terms with some of the actual theoretical schemas of the uncanny, such as they are, in order to source the principal building blocks for an object-oriented uncanny.

4 Sigmund Freud: The Return of the Repressed

In Freud’s analysis, then, the uncanny is always something to do with “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex”.⁵³ This list comprises “practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny”.⁵⁴ And yet, immediately following this assertion, Freud remarks that “we can also speak of a living person as uncanny”.⁵⁵ This “also” extends itself throughout the essay such that, in the final reckoning, epilepsy, madness, dead bodies, fragmented bodies, live burial, silence, solitude and darkness can also produce the uncanny, as can any effacement of the distinction between imagination and reality. Freud himself, it would appear, suffers from the uncanny’s unsettling occurrence, continuing to add new causes and examples to his eclectic list well into the final pages of the essay. Doubt, however, can be generative, and it is Freud’s sustained attempt to explain the contradictions in his theory that steers him to his discovery that these antinomies all stem “from the realm of fiction, of imaginative writing”.⁵⁶

Freud, for his part, does submit several tentative definitions of the uncanny - always qualified - that shed some light as to its “secret nature”.⁵⁷ The following is the most crucial:

If psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; and it would be a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some *other* effect.⁵⁸

In this brief passage, Freud succinctly details the mechanism that underpins his conception of the uncanny. Quite simply, the uncanny is the experience of a *return*, a return of something that has been

⁴⁹ Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 365.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

repressed (an anxiety), or previously surmounted (superstitious/animistic belief).⁵⁹ There are two aspects to this mechanism: the occasion of the return, experienced as unfamiliar, and the (once) familiar belief/content that recurs to consciousness. Therefore, while the return can be experienced as frightening, the thing that returns need not be frightening in and of itself. Thus, for Freud, the uncanny is not so much a content or object, but a temporality, a *return of the past* that makes the unfamiliar familiar (or vice versa). It is this temporal rupture, internal to the subject that, for Freud, constitutes the uncanny.⁶⁰

This would seem to be relatively straight-forward. However, as Freud admits several pages later, this definition only satisfies the “*psychoanalytic interest in the problem of the uncanny, and that what remains probably calls for an aesthetic inquiry*”,⁶¹ prompting him to concede that there are undoubtedly “other elements besides those which we have so far laid down as determining the production of uncanny feelings”.⁶² Moreover, the very existence of these other elements “open the door to doubts about what exactly is the value of our general contention that the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed”.⁶³ Despite the seemingly endless profusion of causes Freud finds himself grappling with, he ultimately retreats to the relative clarity of his psychical theory of its *operation*. Indeed, as Freud’s essay progresses it becomes clear that, for him, the uncanny is in fact two ostensibly irreconcilable phenomena, a *psychoanalytic* uncanny and a *representational* uncanny: “we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about”.⁶⁴

These comments come toward the end of Freud’s essay, and yet the entire essay is presented as an investigation into aesthetics, however haphazard.⁶⁵ Indeed, “The ‘Uncanny’” famously opens with a curiously uncharacteristic rhetorical defence of the work, a sort of apology for delving into this field; for it is only rarely, he claims, “that the psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics”.⁶⁶ For Freud, then, the uncanny falls under the purview of aesthetics, understood not simply as the “theory of beauty” but “the theory of the qualities of feeling”⁶⁷ and, more specifically, “feelings of repulsion and distress”.⁶⁸ Just what constitutes aesthetics or indeed the aesthetic experience and, by extension, what status and consideration such a field should be accorded within the psychoanalytic framework is, however, one of the great unresolved binds at the heart of “The ‘Uncanny’”. Even so, what can be determined from Freud’s text is that his “*aesthetic inquiry*”, if such it is, dwells almost exclusively on literature.

This, Freud tells us, should not be surprising. Literature is, after all, a “more fertile province” for the uncanny than real life.⁶⁹ And yet, “nearly all the instances that contradict our hypothesis are taken from the realm of fiction, of imaginative writing”.⁷⁰ Because literary fiction is not bound by real world conditions of plausibility, it contains “the whole of the latter [real life] and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life”.⁷¹ This results in a kind of paradox: “that *in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life*”.⁷² Art can produce the uncanny, hence

59 Freud notes that the distinction between these two is “often a hazy one” (372): “we must not let our predilection for smooth solutions and lucid exposition blind us to the fact that these two classes of the uncanny experience are not always sharply distinguishable” (ibid).

60 This reading of Freud’s ‘uncanny’ as a temporal phenomenon is indebted to Katherine Withy’s analysis of “The ‘Uncanny’” in *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (2015), 22-29.

61 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 370.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 “We have drifted into this field of research half involuntarily, through the temptation to explain certain instances which contradicted our theory of the causes of the uncanny” (Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” 375).

66 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 339.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 340.

69 Ibid., 372.

70 Ibid., 370.

71 Ibid., 372.

72 Ibid., 372-3.

its fascination for Freud. What Freud suggests here is that while literature is a capacious and malleable medium uniquely suited to producing the uncanny, the very conditions of possibility for its production - the conventions of form and narrative and, by extension, the reader's familiarity with these conventions - can overpower, deliberately or by default, experiences that would be uncanny in the "real world".

Of course, the famous focal point of "The 'Uncanny'", and the archetypal blueprint of all readings of the uncanny in fiction, is his analysis of E.T.A Hoffman's short story *The Sandman*. Here, Freud traces the psychic trajectory of repression and return in the life of the story's protagonist Nathaniel. The tale of the monstrous sandman who steals children's eyes, told to Nathaniel as a boy, is read into the figure of Coppelius, a lawyer whom Nathaniel associates with the unexplained death of his father. Coppelius is himself later transferred into the figure of Coppola, an optician. Spurning his lover Clara, Nathaniel falls in love with an artfully constructed automaton, which is only revealed to him as such when he sees her eyeless face. This pronounced association with eyes and its psychologically traumatic effect on Nathaniel at various points in his short life is explained by Freud as a substitute for a repressed castration anxiety, relayed through a symbolic oedipal configuration. The story is, therefore, in Freud's reckoning, a paradigmatic dramatization of a "return of the repressed".

So far so good, but Freud's explicit claim is that the uncanny can only be produced in literature that coincides with "common reality".⁷³ In other words, the power and profusion of Hoffmann's uncanny is possible because his tales supposedly subscribe to a form of literary realism. Should the supernatural or preternatural arise, as it often does in these stories, the uncanny effect is still produced, in Freud's reckoning, because "by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object".⁷⁴ Conversely, if the implausibility of the fictional realm is foregrounded, then the uncanny cannot occur. The spirits that populate the works of Dante and Shakespeare are not, for Freud, uncanny. They are too embedded in the "unrealistic" poetic reality of their narrative world: "we adapt our judgement to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard souls, spirits and ghosts as though their existence had the same validity as our own has in material reality. In this case too we avoid all trace of the uncanny".⁷⁵ This is a concrete law for Freud, and we "accept his [the author's] ruling in every case".⁷⁶

Freud's emphasis on authorial power here is crucial to his conception of both literature and the uncanny; "the storyteller has a *peculiarly* directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions".⁷⁷ Cixous's essay is, once again, illuminating on this point. For Freud, she writes, "it is the writer who consents to give birth to the *Unheimliche*", and "the writer is also what Freud wants to be. Freud sees in himself the writer".⁷⁸ Consequently, Freud's tacit claim is that the uncanny is something fixed to or embedded in a text by the author and the conventions they employ or subscribe to, a series of triggers which, if successful, will detonate a return of the repressed. In the case of "stories which flirt with the supernatural",⁷⁹ the uncanny is, moreover, achieved by way of a "trick" or "deceit" that either flaunts, obfuscates or withholds the rules of the story's purported realism.

The problem with this is that *The Sandman* is not a work of straightforward realism, and there can be no question of being "tricked" into experiencing the uncanny here. One reads Hoffman's stories expecting, even desiring, an experience of terror or the uncanny, and his mix of German Romanticism, the psychological, and the surreal, are formally predicated on producing these precise feelings. Various critics have picked up on Freud's strange misprision of Hoffman's story, his silence on the sexual component of Nathaniel's obsession with the automaton Olympia, for example, but most ignore or underplay the fact that *The Sandman* is a work of what would now be called metafiction, which is to say, that it plays with its own status as a work of fiction. This self-awareness runs throughout Hoffman's *oeuvre*, reaching its apotheosis in a later novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr* (1820-22), in which the eponymous cat's

⁷³ Ibid., 374.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 373-4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 373.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 375.

⁷⁸ Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms", 532.

⁷⁹ Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", 374.

autobiography is, due to a “printing error”, spliced with a second book on the composer Johannes Kreisler. Clearly *The Sandman* is a more understated endeavour than this, but it is still a surreal text.

For example, after the exchange of several letters recounting some of Nathaniel and Clara’s narrative, an anonymous “narrator” appears or, rather, interjects, and we become the ‘dear/kind/gentle reader’ of a story markedly different in tone. This moment, appearing roughly half-way through the story, knowingly comments upon, even dramatizes, how a “tale of terror” should be written. While the following extract may strain the point, this aspect of *The Sandman* is so utterly disavowed in Freud’s reading as to justify quoting at length:

No one, I must admit, gentle reader, ever actually asked for the story of young Nathaniel; but as you well know, I am one of those rum writers to whom, if burdened with impressions of the kind I’ve just described, it seems as if anyone who happens to cross their path, indeed the whole world, were dying to know: ‘What’s bothering you? Pray tell us if you please!’ So I felt a pressing need to speak to you of Nathaniel’s fateful path. The very wondrousness and strangeness of it consumed my consciousness, but for that very reason - and because I needed to make you, dear reader, likewise inclined and, therefore, able to bear the things I am about to tell you, which is no small feat - I tormented myself with how to begin my account in a significant, original, gripping fashion.

‘Once upon a time’ - the nicest start to any tale - seemed too vapid! ‘In the small provincial town of S. there lived. . .’ sounded a bit better, at least informative enough to pave the way for the climax. Or to begin right off *in media res*: “‘The devil take you!’ the young student Nathaniel cried out with a wild-eyed look of anger and dread at the sight of the barometer pedlar Giuseppe Coppola’ - this I had, in fact, already written down when I was suddenly struck by something droll in the wild-eyed look of the young student Nathaniel; but the story is not in the least bit comical. I could find no words to reflect even the faintest glimmer of the burning heart of the matter. So I decided to dispense with the beginning.

Just take the three letters, gentle reader, that my friend Lothar was kind enough to pass on to me, as the outline of the picture, to which I will take pains to add more and more colour in the telling. Maybe I will manage, like a good portrait painter, to conjure up a character such that you will find a convincing resemblance without knowing the original; indeed that it will seem to you as if you had seen that person many times with your own two eyes. Maybe then, dear reader, you will believe that there is nothing more wondrous and strange than life itself, and that all that the poet can do is convey a dark reflection of it in a lightly buffed mirror.⁸⁰

As unreliable and, perhaps, unhinged, as the narrator/editor appears here, they have total authorial control. This figure is both inside the world of the story (as a friend of the characters) and partially outside of it as well, as its architect. Nevertheless, the narrator does address the principle concern of Freud’s theory, namely, the formal techniques by which “to make you, dear reader, likewise inclined and, therefore, able to bear the things I am about to tell you”.⁸¹ Of course, by so deliberately divulging the authorial process to the reader, the validity of Freud’s theory that the uncanny is only possible via literary realism is shattered. *And yet*, the story is still capable of invoking uncanny feelings. Literature is at once that which both contradicts his theory and that from which his theory is drawn. For Freud, then, the clash between the psychoanalytic uncanny and the representational uncanny remains, in the last instance, unresolved, and for the precise reason that to admit that this differentiation is a forced one, would be to make psychoanalysis a kind of “fiction” in its own right.

This echoes Cixous’ conclusion that the experiential uncanny and the literary uncanny do not negate each other so much as “intermingle”: “the *Unheimliche* in fiction overflows and comprises the *Unheimliche* of real life”.⁸² Indeed, Cixous’ central claim in *Fiction and Its Phantoms* is that fiction’s arch-phantom is, in fact, the uncanny; “Fiction, through the intervention of *new forms of Unheimliche*, is *the very strange thing*”.⁸³ It is Freud’s inability to fully grasp this generative component of and in fiction that renders “The ‘Uncanny’”, for Cixous, such a disjointed and unresolved text. Freud, reading literature from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis, takes fiction to be a “Reserve of the Repressed” in which the author alone has the power and freedom to recursively nest this repressed content.⁸⁴ The uncanny emerges as something fossilized or

⁸⁰ Hoffmann, “The Sandman”, 21-3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸² Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms”, 546.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 547.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

embedded in the text itself, and not as something produced through a particular reader-text configuration. Freud is unable to move beyond such a reading as this would be to “open the door to doubts”,⁸⁵ not only for the psychoanalytic understanding of the uncanny, but for psychoanalysis itself. Even so, Freud is not so far from Cixous’ conclusion that “the enigma of the *Unheimliche* has a literary answer”,⁸⁶ even if his understanding is organised as an antagonism between psychoanalysis and literature.

Cixous’ reading of Freud is important, not just in the history of Freud’s reception in the humanities, but also because, by dissolving the binary between the experienced uncanny and the representational uncanny, Cixous affirms not only Freud’s claim that the uncanny is an aesthetic phenomenon but, moreover, that the aesthetic realm is itself uncanny: “fiction (...) is *the very strange thing*”.⁸⁷ Furthermore, by collapsing the binary *without* effacing either part, Cixous posits, in germ, an uncanny that is produced, not discovered, through the encounter between subject and text, an uncanny un-beholden to authorial intent.

5 Ernst Jentsch: Psychical Uncertainty

Having begun with Freud, we can now begin again, as it were, with Ernst Jentsch. While Jentsch’s short but rich paper, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906), precedes Freud’s essay chronologically it has been overshadowed, for the most part, by Freud’s better-known text, and read only in terms of Freud’s (mis)reading of it. This is not to say that he has been entirely overlooked. Forbes Morlock and Dany Nobus’ papers in the mid-1990s both stress the need to reconsider Jentsch as both an influence on Freud and as a thinker in his own right. More recently, Jentsch has seen something of a revival in studies of the uncanny, and many of the critics cited in this paper - Nicholas Royle, Anneleen Masschelein, Katherine Withy etc. - devote considerable time to his meditation on the topic. Nevertheless, Jentsch is often still characterized as a peripheral figure, quoted “only to quote Freud quoting [him]”.⁸⁸

To begin with, then, Jentsch prefaces his study with the assertion that “no attempt will be made here to define the essence of the uncanny. Such a conceptual explanation would have very little value”.⁸⁹ The reason being that “the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody”.⁹⁰ Nor, it must be said, does it always arise in the *same* person twice and, if it does, not necessarily in the same way.⁹¹ While Freud stretches the remit of his investigation in order to uncover the “common core”⁹² that unites all instances of the uncanny, the proper object of both Freud and Jentsch’s studies remains, for the most part, those “psychical processes which culminate experientially in the subjective impression of the uncanny”.⁹³ Thus the job of the psychologist is to investigate “how the affective excitement of the uncanny arises in psychological terms [and] how the psychical conditions must be constituted so that the ‘uncanny’ sensation emerges”.⁹⁴

Jentsch terms the theory he summons to explain these processes “psychical uncertainty”⁹⁵ or, more emphatically, “*lack of orientation*”,⁹⁶ which is to say, *disorientation*. What does this mean? In a general sense, it just means that the “new and the unusual” are often incorporated “with mistrust, unease, and even hostility”.⁹⁷ More specifically, it denotes the struggle of the psyche to assimilate a new phenomenon

⁸⁵ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 370.

⁸⁶ Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms”, 532.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 547.

⁸⁸ Morlock, “Doubly Uncanny”, 17.

⁸⁹ Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, 217.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 339.

⁹³ Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, 218.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

“into its proper place”,⁹⁸ which arises as a disruption or discontinuity in the “previous ideational sphere of the individual”.⁹⁹ The uncanny, in other words, is the experience of an unfamiliarity which cannot be intellectually/psychically mastered. As soon as mastery or familiarity is restored, the object or event ceases to be uncanny. This means that the uncanny, for Jentsch, is not the return of a forgotten but once-familiar belief or anxiety, but a fleeting encounter with the deep, default *unfamiliarity* of reality.

Much like Freud’s essay, Jentsch then proceeds to supply the reader with a list of potential sources for uncanny sensations. He opens by claiming that the uncanny can be produced whenever one is made aware of the difference between the known and the self-evident.¹⁰⁰ The rising of the sun is usually, Jentsch tells us, a self-evident phenomenon. Its rising is so habitually familiar that its mechanics are not interrogated or even acknowledged. However, once one considers what is factually known about the rising of the sun, that is, “when one remembers that the rising of the sun does not depend on us at all but rather on the movement of the earth”, then “feelings of uncertainty” are likely to arise.¹⁰¹ Other possible instances of psychical uncertainty include ignorance, narcotics, exhaustion, or the presence of a “rampantly proliferating fantasy”.¹⁰² This list is added to a page later, such that “light sleep, states of deadening of all kind, various forms of depression and after-effects of diverse terrible experiences, fears, and severe cases of exhaustion or general illness”¹⁰³ also have the potential to produce uncanny sensations, as can the breakdown of a sense organ; thus “in the night, which is well known to be a friend to no man, there are [...] many more and much larger chicken-hearted people than in the light of day”.¹⁰⁴

With this list, Jentsch is substantially more diagnostic than Freud, both in his examples and his theory of their causes. He even suggests that the uncanny *qua* psychical uncertainty bears a number of similarities with the “general disorientation that appears in psychical illness”.¹⁰⁵ Even so, after several more examples, Jentsch introduces what he considers to be the most common cause of the uncanny: “doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate”.¹⁰⁶ For example, the epileptic, Jentsch argues, can appear uncanny, her fitful movements a reminder of the mechanical nature of the human body. Likewise, and passing from the animate-inanimate to the inanimate-animate, “the horror which a dead body (especially a human one), a death’s head, skeletons and similar things cause can [...] be explained to a great extent by the fact that thoughts of a latent animate state always lie so close to these things”.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, when a “wild man” first sees a train or steamboat in poorly lit conditions, the machine’s autonomous movements and noises “impress the completely ignorant person as a living mass”.¹⁰⁸ This effect is compounded, Jentsch claims, when the lifeless thing is imparted with anthropomorphic qualities as when “the outline of a cloud or shadow becomes a threatening Satanic face”,¹⁰⁹ or when visiting “collections of wax figures, panopticons and panoramas”.¹¹⁰ Jentsch also links this to animism, “the natural tendency of man to infer, in a kind of naïve analogy with his own animate state, that things in the external world are also animate or, perhaps more correctly, are animate in the same way”.¹¹¹

Jentsch’s investigations on this point prefigure the so-called “Uncanny Valley” index, the idea, predominant in robotics, that the more a robot or CGI model looks, sounds, or thinks like a human, the more uncanny and uncomfortable it makes humans feel. Jentsch, of course, is not thinking about how to make

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., 219.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid., 220.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., 221.

107 Ibid., 227.

108 Ibid., 222.

109 Ibid., 224.

110 Ibid., 222.

111 Ibid., 225.

non-threatening robots, but he is, nevertheless, acutely aware of how verisimilitude invokes the uncanny. This has certain ramifications for aesthetics. Indeed, “true art”, Jentsch claims, “avoids the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings”.¹¹² Literature and theatre, for example, allow us to experience powerful feelings “without having to accept the consequences of the causes of the unpleasant moods if they were to have the opportunity to appear in corresponding form on their own account”.¹¹³ Art “manages to make most emotions enjoyable for us in some sense”,¹¹⁴ and thus, just as Freud argued, the uncanny can be “made serviceable by the virtuosic manipulation of the author for the purposes of artistic investigation”.¹¹⁵ For Jentsch, the “most reliable” way to produce the uncanny in fiction is “to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him [...] E.T.A. Hoffmann has repeatedly made use of this psychological artifice with success”.¹¹⁶

This, it should be noted, is the single reference Jentsch makes to Hoffmann in his entire essay, and this juncture affords an opportunity to examine in more detail just why Freud dismisses Jentsch’s theory. Freud posits that intellectual uncertainty is not enough to explain the uncanny, and that something must be added to it. This supplement, as we have seen, is the return of a repressed anxiety. The proper source of the uncanny in Hoffmann’s story is thus, for Freud, not the automaton Olympia, but the tale’s general preoccupation with eyes and, more importantly, the threat of their *loss* - a symbolic return of a repressed castration anxiety.¹¹⁷ And it is true that the story is unquestionably about eyes and sight, about making “us [the reader], too, look through the demon optician’s spectacles”.¹¹⁸ But the emphasis on eyes is deliberately overworked, often in the service of the sardonic humour and *schadenfreude* that simmers throughout the story. For example, discussing how Nathaniel could fall for the “wax face of that wooden doll”,¹¹⁹ Nathaniel’s friend Siegmund dryly observes that in “matters of beauty and love, all is in the eye of the beholder”,¹²⁰ and, further, that “she might well be considered beautiful, if her gaze was not so devoid of life, so totally lacking, you might say, the power of sight [...] it was as if she were only acting like a living being”.¹²¹

Olympia speaks only a handful of words, most notably “Oh, Oh!”, but Nathaniel ignores her “total passivity and laconic manner”¹²² in lieu of her ability to peer “for hours and hours [...] into the eye of her beloved without fidgeting or budging”.¹²³ Earlier in the tale, the dejected Nathaniel pens a feverish poem for Clara in which the hated Coppelius appears while the two of them stand at the marriage altar. Coppelius touches Clara’s eyes, causing them to “burst open against his breast, searing and burning like bloody sparks”,¹²⁴ only for Clara’s voice to cry out: “Can you not see me? Coppelius deceived you, those were not my eyes that burned in your breast, they were the glowing drops of your own heart’s blood - I still have my eyes, just look at me!”.¹²⁵ This moment foreshadows the climactic scene where Nathaniel bursts in on Professor Spalanzani [Olympia’s creator] and Coppola fighting over Olympia. Coppola escapes with what Nathaniel now realises is a lifeless doll before a bloody Spalanzani turns on Nathaniel:

‘After him! [...] the clockwork - speech - step - all mine - the eyes - the eyes robbed from you. [...] fetch me back Olympia - there are her eyes!’ Then Nathaniel spotted a pair of bloody eyes peering at him from the floor. Spalanzani grasped them with his uninjured hand and flung them at him so that they struck him on the breast. Then madness grabbed him [...]¹²⁶

¹¹² Ibid., 223.

¹¹³ Ibid., 223-4, emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 224.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 352.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 351.

¹¹⁹ Hoffmann, “The Sandman”, 42.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 42-3.

¹²² Ibid., 45.

¹²³ Ibid., 44.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 47.

Is Nathaniel symbolically castrated here, and, if so, is this the uncanny moment? Freud suggests that the answer, in both cases, is yes, and perhaps some readers may find this to be the case. What is certain, however, is that while this may well be an uncanny moment for the reader, it is not uncanny for Nathaniel who, far from experiencing a disquieting return of the repressed, collapses into full-blown madness.

Contra Jentsch, Freud argues that there can be “no question [...] of any intellectual uncertainty here”,¹²⁷ (352), but Freud misreads what is uncertain about this scene. In Freud’s words, relegated to a footnote:

[...] this automatic doll can be nothing else than a materialisation of Nathaniel’s feminine attitude toward his father in his infancy [...] Spalanzani’s otherwise incomprehensible statement that the optician has stolen Nathaniel’s eyes, so as to set them in the doll, now becomes significant [...] Olympia is, as it were, a dissociated complex of Nathaniel’s which confronts him as a person, and Nathaniel’s enslavement to this complex is expressed in his senseless excessive love for Olympia.¹²⁸

But is Spalanzani’s statement really “incomprehensible” here? Jentsch tells us that the uncanny is produced through uncertainty or disorientation regarding the animate or inanimate nature of Olympia. On this reading, the eyes are important not because they symbolise a castration anxiety, but because they are the symbol and centrepiece of the automaton’s life-like qualities. Olympia “confronts him as a person”, and it is precisely this personhood that, on a Jentschian reading, Freud overlooks. Conversely, the eyes also suggest the automation of Nathaniel himself (the body is an assemblage of parts that can be removed or replaced and so on). For Nathaniel, the seemingly real eyes - his own eyes - that Spalanzani throws at his chest, signal his psychological breakdown, understood as the visceral horror of revelation - Olympia’s inanimateness - and the bloody fulfilment of his moral failings - the “eyes” the sandman led him to devote to Olympia instead of Clara. For the reader, Nathaniel seeing his own eyes thrown at him, eyes “stolen” by the Coppeliuss/Coppola/sandman figure, is not incomprehensible but *disorientating*, leaving the reader uncertain as to the reality of the events, the reality of Olympia, the reality of the sandman, and the “reality” of the story itself, which is rendered unfamiliar, or rather, *unheimliche*.¹²⁹

This reading of Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” is, of course, extrapolated from Jentsch’s essay. Jentsch himself provides no such reading, nor is he as concerned with the representational uncanny as Freud is. Jentsch’s essay is preoccupied, instead, with unfamiliarity as such; how the familiar overlays the unfamiliar, and how this shroud can be rent. Katherine Withy, who will be our guide through Heidegger’s *unheimlichkeit* in the next section, is especially insightful on this point. For Jentsch, she writes, “an ambiguity of in/animateness is uncanny when this ambiguity calls the very distinction between animate and inanimate into question”.¹³⁰ Hence ghosts are uncanny “because they ambiguously span different categories [living and dead, past and present], belonging to both and neither”.¹³¹ This cuts to heart of the Jentschian uncanny, with the addendum that not all ghosts are necessarily uncanny.¹³²

Even so, this categorical ambiguity can be found in “The Sandman” when, for example, Nathaniel kisses Olympia only to find that “her lips were ice-cold! And, just as when he’d first touched Olympia’s cold hand, he felt a shudder run through him, the legend of the dead bride suddenly flashing through his mind”.¹³³ The zombie bride is a parable of death-in-life, an ambiguity that problematizes the very categories of life and death. Another example, appearing much earlier in the story, occurs when Nathaniel himself is treated as a doll or automaton. When Coppelius catches the child Nathaniel spying on him and his father, he threatens to burn out his eyes with hot coals. Nathaniel’s father begs for clemency and Coppelius relents,

¹²⁷ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 352.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, footnote, 353-4.

¹²⁹ The crucial scene occurs when Coppola sells Nathaniel a pocket looking-glass which he then uses to peer at Olympia (who “sits” in Spalanzani’s rooms across the street). At first her eyes appear “blank and dead”, but: “as he brought her face into greater and greater focus in the looking-glass, it seemed to him as if Olympia’s eyes flashed open in moist moonbeams. It was as if she had only now acquired the power of sight” (Hoffmann 35). Olympia now “lives”, via Nathaniel, and the Sandman’s work is done.

¹³⁰ Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, 17.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Indeed, using Oscar Wilde’s *Canterville Ghost* as an example, Freud shows how ghosts can also be familiar, even comical.

¹³³ Hoffmann, “The Sandman”, 41.

but he still grabs the child, remarking: “let us take a close look at the mechanism of the hands and feet”.¹³⁴ As Nathaniel relates it in his letter to Clara: “he grasped me so hard that my joints snapped, and twisted off my hands and feet and reinserted them here and there. Coppelius sputtered and lisped: ‘Tis not right this way! ‘Twas good the way it was! The old man got it right!’ and everything around me went dark”.¹³⁵ Nathaniel enacts a similar miscategorization when, annoyed with Clara, he calls her a “lifeless, accursed automaton!”¹³⁶

What is revealed in these instances of categorical ambiguity is the deep unfamiliarity of things. Withy is particularly suggestive on this point:

[Jentsch shows] that each of our ways of making familiar need not capture an entity entirely. Our uncertainty in this case is possible because there is a gap between the sense that we make of the entity and the entity itself. Jentsch implies that this gap is always there. It is not a feature of *some* way of making something familiar, or of *our* ways of making things familiar, which we might avoid by finding a better way to grasp the world. It belongs to the constitution of familiarity itself that something familiar is not thereby entirely captured.¹³⁷

In the above example, it is Nathaniel’s own body which is rendered unfamiliar. Following Withy, Jentsch’s great insight, then, is that:

[...] familiarity is always grounded in a more basic unfamiliarity. The uncanny feeling marks our experience of this more basic unfamiliarity, which renders the familiar perpetually unstable and able to show up as perplexing or recalcitrant. It shows that the way we make sense of things is never adequate to the world.¹³⁸

Thus, while the past that returns for Freud is an infantile or primitive anxiety, belief, or superstition, the “past” that returns for Jentsch, Withy argues, is the structure of familiarity itself.¹³⁹

Much more might be said here as to Freud’s reading of Hoffmann’s tale and the kind of reading we can assume Jentsch would have supplied, but we have at least illustrated the Jentschian method and how it diverges from Freud’s. If Freud teaches us that the aesthetic realm is uncanny, we learn from Jentsch that familiarity - the homely - is only possible as a psychical structure built atop a more foundational unfamiliarity caused by the gap between an entity and one’s experience of that entity. In this, Jentsch suggests a shift in register from the psychological to the ontological.

6 Martin Heidegger: the Unconcealment of Being

On the face of it, Heidegger’s notion of *unheimlichkeit*, uncanniness, seems to be of a very different order to the psychoanalytical variations discussed so far. The term itself is used only sporadically in Heidegger’s works, developed most fully several years after *Being and Time* (1927) in a 1935 lecture series later published as the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953).¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Katherine Withy’s in-depth study *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, published in 2015, is the first full treatment of the concept as it features and functions in Heidegger’s philosophy. However, determining what Heidegger means by *unheimlichkeit* and what status it should be afforded in his philosophy is no easy task. Withy isolates no less than five reasons why this is the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹³⁷ Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, 21.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴⁰ The *Introduction to Metaphysics* is a notoriously problematic volume in Heidegger’s *oeuvre*, endorsing, as it does, the “inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism (Heidegger, *Introduction*, 213). With the publication of the *Black Notebooks* in 2014, no philosophy indebted to Heidegger’s insights, as OOO most assuredly is, can proceed without addressing Heidegger’s anti-Semitism and its relationship to his philosophy. I find Morton’s response the most compelling. Rather than simply cherry-picking the good or useful parts of Heidegger’s project and sweeping the bad under the proverbial carpet, Morton deconstructs Heidegger’s thought from within. In doing so, Heidegger’s Nazism becomes “a bug, not a feature”, and a position, moreover, “illegal within Heidegger’s [own] thought” (*Humankind* 91).

case, and while there is no need to go into them here, it is worth reiterating that uncanniness is a “minor and irregular theme in Heidegger’s corpus”.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, while the uncanny never commands the kind of technical status enjoyed by terms like *existenz*, *geworfenheit*, or *zuhandenheit*, Heidegger “keeps returning to it”.¹⁴² As with Jentsch before him, and Freud even more so, Heidegger’s discussion of uncanniness emerges in concert with a piece of literature, in this case, the first choral ode from Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Understanding Heidegger’s idiosyncratic treatment of the ode requires a somewhat dramatic shift in approach and perspective from the kinds of literary analyses we have seen so far. For Heidegger, the ode, which charts humanity’s journey from its ancient tribal origins to cosmopolitan civilisation - all while failing to overcome death - is not an ontic account of peoples and the passing of time, but an ontological account of human being, which is to say, the story of Dasein itself.¹⁴³ Heidegger’s translation of the ode is considered to be somewhat unorthodox, and while the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of his translation may have informed his thinking on the uncanny, it makes no difference to our investigation which comes to his explication after the fact. Heidegger translates the opening lines of the ode as follows: “Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing/uncannier than man bestirs itself, rising up beyond him”.¹⁴⁴ These lines open up, for Heidegger, the ontological import of the uncanny for human beings and, indeed, human being: “the human being is, in *one* word, *to deinotaton*, the uncanniest”.¹⁴⁵

Pre-empting his audience, Heidegger then asks “why do we translate *deinon* as ‘un-canny’?”¹⁴⁶ First, he claims, because *deinon* denotes terror and violence, or violence-doing, that is, violence against the world or the “overwhelming sway”.¹⁴⁷ As is typical in Heidegger’s writings, this is not violence as it is conventionally understood, but violence as “the basic trait not just of his [humankind’s] doing but of his Dasein”.¹⁴⁸ Thus, and perhaps surprisingly, uncanniness is, in this specific sense, “the basic trait of the human essence, into which every other trait must always be drawn”.¹⁴⁹ This would seem to suggest that uncanniness is not such a minor concept in Heidegger’s philosophy after all. In fact, it turns out that uncanniness is synonymous with unconcealment (*unverborgenheit*): “in the happening of uncanniness, beings as a whole open themselves up. This opening up is the happening of unconcealment. This is nothing other than the happening of uncanniness”.¹⁵⁰ This places the uncanny at the very core of Heidegger’s philosophy,¹⁵¹ while also providing some explanation as to why the uncanny is so often overlooked by Heideggerians. It also begs the question - why use *unheimlichkeit* at all?

The answer is, firstly, etymological. As with Freud, Heidegger is drawn to the strange semantic oscillation between the homely and the unhomely, the known and the unknown, of the *unheimlich*: “we understand the un-canny as that which throws one out of the ‘canny’, that is, the homely, the accustomed, the usual, the un-endangered. The unhomely does not allow us to be at home”.¹⁵² This is, fundamentally, a pivot between the familiar and the unfamiliar. However, whereas Freud and Jentsch take the *unheimlich* to be something explainable by psychology, Heidegger understands it in wholly ontological terms. As Withy puts it lucidly, the question Heidegger is, in effect, asking, is: “what would it be not just to *feel* uncanny but to *be* uncanny?”¹⁵³ Heidegger suggests that humanity’s openness to being makes it fundamentally different to other entities, despite always being amidst them. This, Withy tells us, “makes the human being

141 Ibid., 11.

142 Ibid.

143 Ibid., 105.

144 Heidegger, *Introduction*, 156.

145 Ibid., 159.

146 Ibid., 160.

147 Ibid., 159.

148 Ibid., 160.

149 Ibid., 161.

150 Ibid., 178.

151 As Mark Wrathall writes: “For Heidegger, the essence of truth is always understood in terms of unconcealment, and Heidegger never stops inquiring into unconcealment. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find any work in Heidegger’s vast corpus that does not have some discussion of unconcealment” (12).

152 Heidegger, *Introduction*, 161.

153 Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, 2.

unhomely - and unhomely precisely where it makes its home".¹⁵⁴ Thus, "the uncanniest (the human being) is what it is because from the ground up it deals with and conserves the familiar only in order to break out of it and to let what overwhelms it break in".¹⁵⁵ In uncanniness, Dasein "breaks out" - opens-up, and beings "break in" - are disclosed as beings. This is why uncanniness, for Heidegger, must be violence-doing in the sense discussed above, for "breaking forth, breaking up, capturing and subjugating is in itself the first opening of beings as sea, as earth, as animal".¹⁵⁶ Violence-doing, therefore, "is not an application of faculties that the human being has, but [...] a disciplining and disposing of the violent forces by virtue of which beings disclose themselves as such".¹⁵⁷

There are, therefore, two intertwined modes of the uncanny - the "breaking out" of Dasein and the "breaking in" of other entities. Let us consider these in turn. What does the breaking out of Dasein from the bounds of the familiar look like in fiction? Heidegger does, in fact, provide an example of this in the form of a reading of *Oedipus Rex* - the very same text, of course, that unlocks so much of Freud's work. At the beginning of the tale, Heidegger tells us, Oedipus is "the saviour and lord of the state, in the brilliance of glory and the grace of the gods",¹⁵⁸ but he is soon "hurled out of this seeming". This seeming,

[...] is not just Oedipus' subjective view of himself, but that within which the appearing of his Dasein happens. In the end, he is unconcealed in his Being as the murderer of his father and the defiler of his mother. The path from this beginning in brilliance to this end in horror is a unique struggle between seeming (concealment and distortion) and unconcealment (Being).¹⁵⁹

Oedipus, then, "goes to unveil what is concealed".¹⁶⁰ However, in doing so, he places himself "into an unconcealment that in the end he can endure only by gouging out his own eyes - that is, by placing himself outside all light, letting the veil of night fall around him - and then by crying out, as a blind man, for all doors to be flung open so that such a man may be revealed to the people as the man who he is".¹⁶¹

Now, it should be noted that being has its own kind of historicity for Heidegger, and that his elucidation of the uncanny here is part of a broader illustration of how the ancient Greeks experienced Dasein differently to the peoples of the Western world in the twentieth century. Indeed, it is precisely this "authentic" Greek Dasein - which had such "profound consequences for the spirit of the West"¹⁶² - that his discussion of the uncanny, and chapter four of the *Introduction to Metaphysics* more generally, attempts to recover.

Nevertheless, the Oedipus example provides, at the very least, a model for thinking about ontological uncanniness in literature. In a spirit of iconoclasm, how, then, would such a reading be applicable, if it all, to Hoffmann's *The Sandman*? Firstly, and following Withy, it is important to reiterate that Heideggerian uncanniness is not a disquieting feeling, but a "positive revelation of what the human essence is like".¹⁶³ So, in order for *The Sandman* to have some connection to Heideggerian uncanniness, it must open up or unconceal Dasein in some way, in this case, the Dasein of the protagonist Nathaniel. Can a "unique struggle" between seeming and being, between concealment and unconcealment be pinpointed? Does Nathaniel unveil what is concealed? The answer, I suggest, is no. While it could be argued that in the climactic scene Nathaniel is unconcealed in his madness and tragedy as who he is, this scene can be far more readily interpreted as a further concealment, a distortion or disintegration of his being into labyrinths of seeming. If anything, Nathaniel loses the sense of who he is. Indeed, unlike Oedipus, who gouges out his own eyes in order to stand as himself, Nathaniel's eyes are "stolen" from him, as though he, and not Olympia, were the inanimate plaything of Coppélius the Sandman. This, perhaps, is true Heideggerian ontological horror, the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Introduction*, 174.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 167.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 112.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 107.

¹⁶³ Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, 4.

denial of one's very *existenz*. This is not to say, however, that there is no *unheimlichkeit* in Hoffmann's story, and this brings us to the second instance of ontological uncanniness, the "breaking-in" of things as beings themselves. Of course, one entity in particular in *The Sandman* is disclosed as a being, that is, "breaks in", in uncanniness, as an entity: Olympia.

As outlined here, Heideggerian uncanniness is a grounding condition of the possibility of Dasein's play between openness and finitude. However, this is a finitude that, as Withy elegantly puts it, "gives even as it takes; a withholding and closedness that grants an opening",¹⁶⁴ and it is through this invisible opening in the edifice of being that the being of entities can, at times, pour forth. Crucially, these entities are not noumenal realities impossibly removed from the subject. Heidegger's entire philosophy is anthropocentric in this regard; Dasein is unique to humans, who stand alone in their self-reflection on the meaning of being. Therefore, what is at "risk", Withy writes, "are not entities *qua* independent of us but entities *qua* showing up to us as what they are. That is, at stake or at risk is our access to entities in their being".¹⁶⁵ We should not forget, therefore, that concealment is the default state of things in the world,¹⁶⁶ and thus uncovering an entity, as the Heideggerian scholar Mark Wrathall writes, "demands something of us. It requires us to struggle to foster and develop the right skills, attitudes, and bodily dispositions for dealing with it, that is, those skills that will let it show itself in its own essence".¹⁶⁷ The very act of attaining these skills and dispositions, however, reveals, paradoxically, that "there is always more to entities than we can deal with. No matter how skillful we get in dealing with entities, Heidegger argues, there will always be something about them that we cannot focus on or pay attention to".¹⁶⁸

In the case of "The Sandman", the skills, attitudes, and dispositions Nathaniel develops to ostensibly "uncover" Olympia are those of the lover. In one scene he dances with her, but finds it difficult to match the "precise rhythmic steadiness of [her] step".¹⁶⁹ Through these encounters, he believes himself, with all the passionate arrogance of the lover, to be the only one who truly understands her, and dismisses the strange looks and snide laughter of his contemporaries as mere jealousy. But this is, of course, a false unveiling. Every action Nathaniel takes toward revealing Olympia's essence only conceals it further. His comportment is pathologically narcissistic, and while there is something ironically comical in Nathaniel's selfish and petulant outbursts, his is also a tragic figure. If this libidinal narcissism is Nathaniel's *hamartia*, the fatal blow falls, once again, in the climactic scene: "Stunned, Nathaniel stood up - he had seen all too clearly that Olympia's deathly pallid wax face had no eyes, but black hollows in their stead; she was a lifeless doll".¹⁷⁰ This is the true unconcealment. Only when stripped of her eyes (Nathaniel's eyes) can "Olympia" finally return the gaze. This is not just an uncanny breakdown of meaning, as it would be with Freud and Jentsch, but should be understood, instead, as an ontological breaking-in of unconcealment.

7 OOO: Enstranged Strangers

And so, having worked through Freud, Jentsch, and Heidegger, we now have the materials and perspective to lay some foundations for an "object-oriented uncanny". OOO's fundamental tenet is that objects *withdraw* from all relations, including those which striate and structure their own composition. Thus all objects are riven between their inaccessible essence and their appearance-for another object. For Harman, this means that reality is doubly bifurcated into, on the one hand, the real and the sensual, and, on the other, objects and qualities. Real objects and qualities withdraw from any and all relations while sensual objects and qualities "appear" and interact.¹⁷¹ In Timothy Morton's delineation of OOO, this quadruplicity

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 94.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 162.

¹⁶⁶ Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment*, 23.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 24-5.

¹⁶⁹ Hoffmann, "The Sandman", 39.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷¹ This is a generic gloss of OOO. For a detailed discussion see Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (2011).

is replaced by a more general split between essence (the real) and appearance (the sensual). Morton terms this cleave the “*chōrismos*” or “Rift”,¹⁷² and it is the Rift, Morton argues, that produces reality. Without the Rift (and the withdrawn real it implies), nothing would be capable of change or action. There would be no finitude and therefore no excess or reserve or potentiality in objects that allows them to be susceptible to some relations while remaining impervious to others. The Rift, then, is what allows for unified things to change or act or, conversely, to not do these things - to “rest”. It is the differential limit-space that “fuels causality”.¹⁷³

This means that reality, for OOO, is paradoxical and contradictory, a place where the form of things is haunted by withdrawn essences. Reality is *weird*; “twisted, in a loop”.¹⁷⁴ The Rift makes objects uncanny, and “the uncanniness of objects, even to themselves, is what makes them float, breathe, oscillate, threaten, seduce, rotate, cry, orgasm”.¹⁷⁵ For OOO, being is uncanny because being is itself double: objects are their own *doppelgängers*. In his famous psychoanalytic study of the double, Otto Rank claimed that the double is a manifestation of the problem of “man’s relation to himself”.¹⁷⁶ Freud also thinks that the double is something that disturbs the ego, ultimately tying it to his notion of the “compulsion to repeat”; hence “whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny”.¹⁷⁷

OOO, of course, is not particularly concerned with the relationship between the double (as an instance of the uncanny) and ego-formation in humanity’s evolutionary past. Its principle jurisdiction is ontology (*qua* aesthetics). Thus, and following Morton, we find ourselves on new ground when we think of the problem of “man’s relation to himself” as a pan-object ontological issue with phenomenological ramifications, as opposed to a strictly anthropo-psychological mechanism. Objects are “both themselves and not-themselves”,¹⁷⁸ they violate the law of non-contradiction. Likewise, the uncanny, as Susan Bernstein has noted, “comes into being as a violation of the law of noncontradiction. Like a ghost, it ‘is’ and ‘is not’”.¹⁷⁹ For Morton, all objects violate the law of non-contradiction, all objects are ghosted: “the glass is a glass (essence) and an uncanny not-glass (appearance)”.¹⁸⁰ In this, OOO is profoundly Jentschian. Recall that, for Jentsch, familiarity is only possible because reality is primordially unfamiliar. Uncanny sensations are produced by a “*lack of orientation*”.¹⁸¹ In a sense, then, when it comes to the uncanny, to be object-oriented is to be object-*disoriented*. Compare Jentsch’s position, for example, with the following passage from Morton’s *Realist Magic*:

When one object [...] transitions from a certain set of objects to another set, it briefly undergoes the uncanny realization that *not-at-homeness is always the case*, that sensual relations are never the real thing. What we call causality [...] is an uncanny moment that happens in front of the encrypted objects, when a strange object perturbs a domain that has achieved a *necessarily, structurally false* ontic familiarity.¹⁸²

¹⁷² Morton, *Realist Magic*, 26.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷⁴ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5, emphasis removed. “Weird” is one of OOO’s preferred terms, and Morton dwells on the word at length in the opening pages of *Dark Ecology*. While perhaps not entirely synonymous with the notion of the uncanny being developed here, weirdness is certainly a cognate term. Much like Mark Fisher’s definition of the weird as that which allows us “to see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (*The Weird*, 10), OOO uncanniness also works against the anthropocentrism of the Freudian uncanny. Unlike Fisher, however, I do not think that the uncanny need be rejected *in toto*; once free of the cage Freud builds for it, the uncanny becomes the tool *par excellence* for refocusing on the “outside”.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷⁶ Rank, *The Double*, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 361.

¹⁷⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 27.

¹⁷⁹ Bernstein, “It Walks”, 186. Because of this quality, the uncanny is precisely that which Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, for example, cannot account for. Meillassoux rigidly upholds the law of non-contradiction as inviolable, as to break it would imply that an entity could be both contingent and necessary whereas, for Meillassoux, only contingency itself can be necessary.

¹⁸⁰ Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry”, 220.

¹⁸¹ Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, 217.

¹⁸² Morton, *Realist Magic*, 32-3.

This is perhaps the closest Morton gets to prescribing a general rule for the uncanny: the uncanny occurs when “a strange object perturbs a domain that has achieved a *necessarily, structurally false* ontic familiarity”. This is essentially Jentsch’s position with an ontological twist, except, in this case - and this is a crucial distinction - uncanniness is not unique to human psychology but must apply, in some sense, to objects in general. We will return to this point shortly but it should first be pointed out that this perturbation also bears a number of similarities to the concept of *ostranenie* or “enstrangement” - Viktor Shklovsky’s coinage for the processes by which language and its objects are transformed into art.¹⁸³ As Shklovsky sees it, habitual perception (and cognition) breeds “recognition”, a glaze of familiarity that overlays (and ultimately replaces) objects, whose true strangeness is obscured by this coating of pre-digested signification. Enstrangement is the name given to the techniques and devices that dislocate objects from this “sphere of automatized perception”¹⁸⁴ and, by extension, “extricate a thing from the cluster of associations in which it is bound”.¹⁸⁵ If successful, these enstranging techniques will bring the object into view as if “seen for the first time”,¹⁸⁶ until they are themselves made familiar, worn, and clichéd, at which point new techniques must be employed. Thus “an artist”, Shklovsky writes, “always incites insurrections among things”.¹⁸⁷

However, the difference between, on the one hand, Jentsch’s “lack of orientation” and Shklovsky’s enstrangement, and, on the other, OOO’s object-disorientation, is that the latter makes certain ontological claims. To get from Jentsch, Shklovsky, and, indeed, Freud, to OOO, you need ontology, which is why it was necessary to carve a path through Heidegger. Heidegger’s *unheimlichkeit* shows how the uncanny can be not just a feeling or a mood, but an unconcealment of being. As is perhaps beginning to become apparent, the uncanny for OOO is in some sense both: a feeling and experience in the phenomenal realm *and* a structural, ontological concept that makes phenomenality possible. Withy already sees something like this in her reading of Heidegger when she remarks that a Freudian or Jentschian instance of the uncanny reveals “how the uncanny feeling keys us into our essential uncanniness and how it is a consequence of this deeper being uncanny”.¹⁸⁸

Nevertheless, while OOO is born out of the insights of twentieth century phenomenology, it also diverges from these philosophies in significant ways. Most importantly, unconcealment for OOO can never be total; there is no naked access to being-in-itself. Somewhat strangely, this puts Heidegger in closer proximity to Shklovsky than OOO, in the sense that enstrangement - as a wrenching of an object from its contexts in order to truly “see” it - is comparable with Heidegger’s discussion of the antagonism between the “ready-to-hand” - the background functioning of equipment - and the “present-at-hand” - the conscious awareness of equipment when it breaks or fails - as described in his famous “tool-analysis”. By contrast, Harman argues that neither ready-to-handness nor present-at-handness truly exhausts or unveils objects.¹⁸⁹ What Harman takes from Heidegger is that while there are indeed real objects out there, *they evade full disclosure*. In place of a single equipmental contexture waiting to be “realised” by consciousness, Harman posits an explosion of autonomous objects ontologically sealed-off from each other.

Moreover, one of OOO’s recurring philosophical gestures has been to push out, into the Meillassouxian “great outdoors”, concepts that have typically been understood in purely anthropocentric terms. The first and most significant of these concepts is Kantian finitude. While Kant proposed that there is

¹⁸³ This term is more familiarly known as “defamiliarization” from Lee Lemon and Marion Reis’s 1965 translation. However, in his 1990 translation, Benjamin Sher persuasively argues against the viability of this term on the grounds that not only should the word itself have an enstranging effect upon its reader, as per the design of the original Russian neologism, but that the movement from the “familiar” to the “unknown” is in fact not the meaning the term strives to achieve: “on the contrary, it proceeds from the cognitively known (the language of science) [...] to the familiarly known, that is, to real knowledge that expands and ‘complicates’ our perceptual process” (xix).

¹⁸⁴ Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 6.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁸⁸ Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, 161. Hence Withy is not surprised to find that “Heidegger’s uncanny has the structure of Freud’s return of the repressed” (221).

¹⁸⁹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 42-4.

an irrevocable gap between phenomena and noumena and that man (and mind) are thus the only possible measure of all things and are, by extension, philosophy's default limit-point, Harman argues that the gap between phenomena and noumena not only exists, but exists everywhere and at all scales of relation, indeed, structures relationality itself. The consequence of this "global finitude"¹⁹⁰ is not that everything has its own Dasein,¹⁹¹ but that everything becomes, to use Morton's terminology, a "strange stranger".

In the introduction, it was suggested that this term is perhaps the closest any of the main object-oriented philosophers have come to theorizing the uncanny. Morton first uses the term in *The Ecological Thought* (2012) to replace words like "human" and "animal". Living creatures, he writes, are not just strange but "strangely strange. Their strangeness itself is strange".¹⁹² In *Realist Magic*, he revises his position such that all objects are strange strangers, "alien to themselves and one another in an irreducible way",¹⁹³ emphasizing, once again, the doubled nature of objects.¹⁹⁴ Morton then links the strange stranger to the sublime, another term raised in the introduction to this paper. Morton finds his source material for an "object-oriented sublime" not in the work of Kant or Edmund Burke, but in Longinus's first-century tract "On the Sublime". Longinus, Morton argues, locates the sublime "in the 'noble' being that leaves its footprint in you [...] in the object, in the not-me. Thus the sublime tunes us to what is not-me".¹⁹⁵ The uncanny is also an attuning to the not-me, and, moreover, is capable of arising in every-day, mundane, *heimlich* spaces and objects just as much as in cloud-wreathed mountain ranges or galleries.

For OOO, then, Heidegger is right to make the uncanny an ontological concept, but wrong in thinking that it fully unconceals things as they really are. Conversely, Jentsch is right that the uncanny opens an aperture onto the primordial unfamiliarity of things, but wrong to limit this unfamiliarity to human psychology. OOO uncanniness is an enstranging phenomenon in the sense that it signals the breakdown of habitual perception or cognition, but it is also ontologically enstranging in the sense that it emanates from the Rift - the finitudinal horizon that zones revelation and withdrawal. For Heidegger, the Rift could only ever be an opening produced by human being, but for OOO, the Rift is a condition of relationality itself and structures reality whether humans are present or not. Another way of theorizing this is to think of uncanniness as the *enstranged stranger* - a moment when objects are revealed or "made strange" as strange strangers.

The issue with this, however, is the same that was levelled at poststructuralism earlier, namely, does this not make everything (and thus nothing) uncanny? Morton ostensibly claims as much: "Everything is uncanny, because we can't say for sure whether it's alive or not alive, sentient or not sentient, conscious or not conscious, and so on. Everything is spectral, undead, in unique and different ways".¹⁹⁶ But an important distinction can be made here. For while everything may be inherently uncanny (because reality is uncanny), not everything is *experienced* as uncanny. OOO uncanniness is the breaking-in of the Rift into consciousness: a response to finitude produced through ontic-aesthetic enstrangement. Rummaging in the attic one night, the over-sized doll in the corner with its porcelain face and lidless eyes is suddenly profoundly uncanny. Why? Perhaps its mouth seems to move between the intermittent beams of a failing flash-light, or a breath of wind rustles its skirts, or perhaps because it simply "stares back" in hushed stillness, a pregnant quietude that threatens both animateness and inanimateness *at the same time*.

¹⁹⁰ Harman, "Global Finitude", 253.

¹⁹¹ Dasein is *human* being. Withy is helpful on this point: "In misunderstanding ourselves, we disperse ourselves amidst other ways of being. Angst disrupts this misunderstanding by revealing to us that we are cases of Dasein. By coming to grasp ourselves as the kind of entity that we are, we grasp ourselves as ontologically distinct from other kinds of entities. With this self-understanding, we become individuated as the kind of entity that we are" (67).

¹⁹² Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 41.

¹⁹³ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

¹⁹⁴ This is not strictly speaking a doubling (or even a tripling or quadrupling). Objects contain parts, and parts of parts, down, even, to the atomic and sub-atomic level. The very act of "parting", whether by thought, sight, or by collisions between material objects, creates fresh doppelgängers.

¹⁹⁵ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 135.

¹⁹⁶ Morton, *Humankind*, 135.

Whatever the reason may be, the doll momentarily breaks free of its familiar contexts and becomes, for however long it resists “psychical mastery”, an object in the OOO sense i.e. more than its components and less than its current actions,¹⁹⁷ such that “we can’t say for sure whether it’s alive or not alive, sentient or not sentient, conscious or not conscious, and so on”.¹⁹⁸

With the notion of the estranged stranger we have, then, a serviceable concept for an object-oriented uncanny. But this is still very much an uncanniness for-us, for humans. OOO prides itself on being a philosophy of the nonhuman as much as the human. If uncanniness concerns the Rift, and the Rift is a feature of reality whether humans are present or not, then surely nonhuman object-object relations could also be uncanny? While Nicholas Royle acknowledges that the “meaning and significance” of the uncanny “may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the world ‘itself’”,¹⁹⁹ claiming that the doll might “experience” the wind as uncanny is surely a step too far? OOO’s commitment to finitude leads it to dispense with even Heidegger’s distinctions between wealth and poverty. Whether dolls are world-less or world-poor is largely irrelevant, as their inner richness or poverty is, strictly speaking, inaccessible, and whatever determinations one might hazard could only ever be, for OOO, richness or poverty *for-us*.

Despite Steven Shaviro’s admirable defense of panpsychism in his *The Universe of Things*, OOO functions without the assumption that material objects, or their fundamental parts, have some form of “mind” or “mentality”. Hence, if there is uncanniness between nonhuman object-object encounters, and OOO would not rule this out *a priori*, it could only be understood metaphorically. Metaphor, allusion, and translation are the currencies OOO trades in. I add empathy to this list, understood in its early twentieth-century aesthetic sense as the process of “putting ourselves inside” or “feeling ourselves into” external things.²⁰⁰ Morton borrows from antiquity, and uses the term *phantasia* instead: “the capacity of an object to imagine another object [...] how paper looks to stone. How scissors look to paper [...] How one object impinges upon another one. There is too much of it. It magnetizes us with a terrible compulsion”.²⁰¹ We are now in the domain of what Ian Bogost has memorably termed “alien phenomenology”. Doubling down on Harman’s commitment to metaphor, Bogost asks: “what if we deployed *metaphor itself* as a way to grasp alien objects’ perceptions of one another?”²⁰² Here, phrases like “the bat operates like a submarine”, and “redness hues like fire” are not just speculative metaphors but circle the “event horizon” of what it is actually like to be a bat or redness.²⁰³ As OOO forbids all access to the reality of objects, this “metaphorism” or “metametaphorism” is “necessarily anthropomorphic”.²⁰⁴ Alien phenomenology works by analogy: “we never understand the alien experience, we only ever reach for it metaphorically”.²⁰⁵

Returning to the example of the doll, we find that while the uncanny experience draws attention to the Rift, to the Riftic nature of reality, this experience is also already metaphorical in the OOO sense, a translation of the doll’s sensual qualities and profiles into “humanese”. Any hypothetical “experiences” belonging to the doll are thus at a double remove from us, hence the need for a “metametaphorism”. Significantly, these “nested metaphorical renderings” are not lossless, but degrade or distort at each remove:

The relationship between the first object and the second offers the clearest rendition, in so far as metaphor is ever really clear. The next is rendered not in terms of the object’s *own* impression of the third but as the second’s *distorted* understanding of its neighbour seen through the lens of the first.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁷ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 11.

¹⁹⁸ Morton, *Humankind*, 135.

¹⁹⁹ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 2.

²⁰⁰ See Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 18.

²⁰¹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 134-5.

²⁰² Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 67.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

Because the uncanny for OOO is an ontological phenomenon as much as a phenomenological or affective one, it actually *structures* metaphorism as well as being one of its sensual effects. The question, therefore, is not whether the doll experiences the wind as uncanny, but whether reality fractures along the Rift as Morton and OOO claim. The former is just a metaphorical step, a step of metaphorism, from the latter, necessarily more distorted and incoherent because of it.

8 Grains of Sand

While it is important to be able to account for nonhuman-nonhuman object relations, Gothic fiction and, indeed, fiction in general, puts objects and the uncanny into contact with at least one human - the reader. It is this relation in particular that concerns the literary critic. In the introduction to this paper, it was posited that an object-oriented uncanny would suggest new ways of approaching Gothic texts. What, then, are these new strategies, perspectives, or hermeneutics? Are these even the kind of critical openings OOO supplies or advocates for? Harman has claimed in the past that OOO offers less a formal critico-theoretical system for analysing literature than a “*countermethod*” that simply resists undermining, overmining, or duoming texts.²⁰⁷ The enemy here is holism, the notion that not only are wholes made of parts, but that wholes are greater than the sum of their parts. Emergent objects (like global warming) are crucial to OOO, but they are not “more real” than their parts. Thus Morton propounds what he calls an “implosive holism”, which is to say, a holism where wholes are less than their parts.²⁰⁸ Bogost gets close to this with his suggestive remark that, “the ontological equivalent of the Big Bang rests within every object. Being expands”.²⁰⁹ There is a weird universe *inside* “The Sandman”; its myriad parts partially tethered to it and partially free to forge connections beyond it. Some of these parts are more important than others. I have argued that the parts that are important to the Gothic - extreme emotions/affects, the “other”, the thresholds of being, hauntings - are important to OOO as well. OOO Gothicizes reality, but in doing so, it lays bare the Gothic’s multiform engagement with the question of ontology. If a method (or countermethod) for reading the Gothic has been advanced over the course of this paper, it is simply that finding enstranged strangers, and allowing them to find you, attunes one to the imploded universe inside a text.

Uncanniness abounds in this universe of doppelgängers. Recall Freud’s paradox: “that *in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life*”.²¹⁰ For OOO, there is no such paradox. Because everything is structurally uncanny, all of literature and life can potentially be unveiled *as* uncanny. This does not mean, of course, that all works of fiction are equally uncanny. The enstranging techniques and content that unconceal being will vary from text to text. Moreover, these are not universal triggers. The uncanny is not something perfectly fossilized in a story, and neither does it exist purely in the mind. It lives, rather, in the compound of reader *and* text. This means that the uncanny impression will vary from reader to reader, and, as Jentsch noted, may not always arise in the same person twice and, if it does, not necessarily in the same way.²¹¹

“The Sandman”, like many other works of Gothic fiction, places a premium on uncanny content. In the climactic scene, Olympia is unconcealed as a strange stranger. When Nathaniel sees “her” for the automaton that she is, the animate-inanimate uncertainty propagated by the Rift is exposed *as* weird; Olympia is, paradoxically, more “alive” in this moment, in her inanimateness, than when Nathaniel thought her a living, breathing, woman. However, having now read the story many times, this “reveal” has lost much of its potency. Earlier scenes - the strange alchemical experiments conducted by Nathaniel’s father and Coppelius, or the scene where the spectacles that Coppola lays out for Nathaniel become a “thousand eyes”

²⁰⁷ Harman, “The Well-Wrought”, 200.

²⁰⁸ Morton, *Humankind*, 101.

²⁰⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 26.

²¹⁰ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 372-3.

²¹¹ Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, 217.

that “peeped and twitched”,²¹² or the ball scene where Nathaniel and Olympia dance and he speaks to her “in words that neither he nor she understood”,²¹³ or, indeed, the final frantic moments when Nathaniel relapses and tries to kill Clara before falling to his own death - all these scenes now seem to emanate OOO uncanniness with a subtle intensity. This is a slow or sustained uncanniness that seeps into the cracks of the story, is the cracks in the story, the tears in its reality, the residuum of the Rift, manifesting differently at different moments and across different (re)readings.

Stepping back from the immediacy of the story’s content - if such a thing is possible - the uncanniness of “The Sandman” is tied to its form as well. It begins as three letters: the first from Nathaniel to Lothar, the second from Clara to Nathaniel, and the third from Nathaniel to Lothar again. And yet, as touched upon earlier, this epistolary narrative is soon radically overtaken by a nameless near-omniscient narrator who is, it is implied, a friend of Lothar’s. But this ostensible familiarity is undercut by the narrator’s unsettling control over the narrative, their manipulation, even construction, of events. This disjuncture becomes one of the truly uncanny moments in the story - the ultimate enstranging strangeness. For it is here that the story is made a *story*, but a story whose fictive reality seems to overpower our own, capturing us in its gravity.

Moreover, “The Sandman”, just like Freud’s essay, comes to the Anglophone world in translation. The edition used here - Peter Wortsman’s 2012 translation for Penguin - employs, at times, strangely anachronistic words and phrases that wrest the story out of its own time and early nineteenth-century contexts. Appropriately enough, this makes the story strangely familiar, strangely modern, but, in so doing, enigmatically unfamiliar as well; it feels wrong, somehow - “out of joint”. This oscillation between the familiar and the unfamiliar emanates from the Rift. In a cryptic aside toward the beginning of “The ‘Uncanny’”, Freud remarks that the dictionaries he consults on the matter of the *unheimlich* “tell us nothing new” because “we ourselves speak a language which is foreign”.²¹⁴ Much has been made of this curious sentence, but from an object-oriented perspective the meaning is clear: reality comes to us in translation. Indeed, Freud opens his essay “by translating himself” into an uncanny state.²¹⁵ That this talk of translation is itself a translation from Freud’s original German only emphasises the point.

It seems only fitting to end with Freud. His analysis of the uncanny will, no doubt, continue to dominate critical discussions of the concept for years to come. And yet, as Freud himself acknowledges, the uncanny cannot be entirely explained by psychology. Toward the beginning of “The ‘Uncanny’”, Freud quotes approvingly Schelling’s definition of the uncanny: “according to him, everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light”.²¹⁶ This is because this definition can be twisted to support his theory of the “return of the repressed” with relative ease: the “secret” is the repressed content, and the “coming to light” the uncanny return. But OOO - via Jentsch and Heidegger - puts a different spin on Schelling’s definition. It puts the secrecy not in ancestral ego-formation, but in the myriad things of the world, which “come to light” through enstrangement. These things constitute the world of “The Sandman”, they are its objects, but the text itself is also an object, part semantic and understandable, and part withdrawn and impregnable. Gothic fiction, from Horace Walpole to Stephen King, is a pageant of uncanny Olympias; things are not what they seem. And while some are uncannier than others, they are all of them strange - in the right light. This is the gloaming light that OOO casts, and the twilight rays of a new approach to the uncanny.

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²¹² Hoffmann, “The Sandman”, 33.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹⁴ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 341.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 340.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

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