

Berta Ádám

The *Unheimliche* – From The Intellectual Uncertainty To The Return Of The Repressed

Establishing A Context For An Uncanny Concept In The Discourse Of Literary Criticism

(*PhD Thesis*)

Theses

I.

The principal aim of my undertaking was to locate the concept of the “Unheimliche” (= ‘uncanny’) in the discourse of literary theory. My dissertation proposes a description of the use of this concept as a term in literary theory. The interpretation of the concept of the “Unheimliche” is based on the following texts: “Das Unheimliche” and *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* by Sigmund Freud and “Der Sandmann” by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

According to my thesis the spectrum of the term “Unheimliche” can be clarified, the shy, cautious elements of the discourse about the term can be replaced by a systematic unfolding which does not fall prey to any resonance or transference.

Through this research I found that the “Unheimliche” is constantly reproduced in the crises of perception of identity, thus I explore what is associated to this concept through the analysis focusing on the common structural features of thematically different situations or narrative sequences. These narratological or semiotic schemes (recurring patterns) provide us with an understanding of how the “Unheimliche” creates an effect. In order to maintain the productivity of the discourse about the “Unheimliche”, the concept is described in the framework of perceptual and cognitive identification, animation of experience and relative, versatile multiformity.

This paper, through providing an overview of Freud’s interpretation of the short story “Der Sandmann” by Hoffmann, unfolds the structural differences inherent between the theoretical and aesthetic proposal created by Freud, and the functioning of the category itself. My goal was to carry out a comparative analysis of situations characterised by the *unheimlich* effect which clarifies, thus makes it more tangible how to employ the term “Unheimliche” in the discourse of literary theory.

The chapters of this paper describe the context of the “Unheimliche” from various angles. Part 1 (Introduction, Focus) comes up with more or less definition-like statements by Freud, related to the concept of the “Unheimliche”. Part 2 (including the chapters entitled *Eye*, *Secret*, *Displaced Voice*, and *Fire*) provides significant, mainly theoretical insights informing the argument put forth in the paper. Part 3 (Parallel Processing, Grains of Sand) focuses on the close reading of “Der Sandmann” from a structural and a thematic point of view, while Part 4 sums up the findings of the research.

In Chapter 1 I quote Freud who, after Schelling, writes that “everything is uncanny [*unheimlich*] that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.” (77.). As he also explains, “[t]he German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch* – meaning ‘familiar’, ‘native’, ‘belonging to the home’...” (76.)¹ Beside this, the relation between the words “unheimlich” and “heimlich” in the second place is also defined by a part—whole hierarchy, and, in the third place, a temporal succession. Consequently, the relation between these two expressions cannot be unambiguously pinned down to an opposition, it remains open and polysemic.

The pretext mentioned in Freud’s essay comes from a medical context, and it also relates the word *unheimlich* as a central term organising its entire argument. This earlier article concludes that the *unheimlich* effect is always based on *intellectual uncertainty*, while Freud identifies the effect as *the return of the repressed*. It seems that, through the proceeding of Freud’s paper, intellectual uncertainty is bound to return as an original finding of the author in order to become maintainable. This shift itself can be interpreted as the return of the repressed. This observation is but one example of the multiple but unsaid relations that arise while reading this essay by Freud and the short story by Hoffmann—relations that connect the *enunciated* with the form of the *enunciation*, and are present only as implied.

Freud picked “Der Sandmann” as the main example in his essay “Das Unheimliche”, because in his opinion it featured the *par excellence* articulation or articulations of the phenomenon he was interested in. Hoffmann is “a writer [he declares] who succeeded better

¹ Sigmund Freud: “The Uncanny”, In (ed) Victor Sage: *The Gothick Novel*. (London: MacMillan, 1990. pp. 76-87.) 77., 76.

than anyone else in producing uncanny effects.” “Hoffmann is in literature the unrivalled master of conjuring up the uncanny.”²

Through this research I interpret the phenomenon of the “Unheimliche” as an aesthetic category which is supposed to describe an effect brought forth by the operation of particular narrative contexts. My intention was to provide an approach to the concept of the “Unheimliche” so that both the thematic and rhetoric features of the textual practice associated with the term could be revealed. I noted that in case the Freudian use of the term should lead to anomalies, I have to re-interpret or alter this “original” use. My text primarily acknowledges Freud for the introduction of the term “Unheimliche” to a wider theoretical context. Through this achievement of his use of the term has been pinned down to the examples and defining contexts found in the essay entitled “Das Unheimliche” – anchored and brought back to life from there –, thus, as for the future, the inner logic of this context will become dominant, even if it were not in correspondence with particular views of the essay by Freud. The theoretical grounding of my paper are mostly those elaborated by Freud in relation to the *Unheimliche*. Beyond these, as the insights of Freud’s essay retain a distinct pattern, I included other theoretical contributions which provide further findings helpful while interpreting the *Unheimliche*.

When experiencing the *Unheimliche* the unknown appears as paradoxically familiar. A secret unfolds in a way that the very moment – at least from the perceiving subject’s point of view – is absolutely immersed in it. This effect is a topical source of *terror*. Through the short story by Hoffmann used as an example by Freud, several topics can be linked to the category of the “Unheimliche” beside that of fear or terror. These include: *metafictionality*, *perspective*, and *the position, role and responsibility of men of letter*. Through the elaboration the contexts these topics are employed in, and their other characteristic features are also explored.

The various articulations of *Unheimliche* I analysed in my paper, make a particular series of textual repetitions and variations visible, which – in the texts by both Freud and Hoffmann – are mostly conveyed by the codes of Romanticism.

II.

² *Ibid.*, 78., 80.

And now let's proceed with an in-detail summary of what each chapter is about.

In the chapter *Focus* I recall Freud's remark that our interest in the Unheimliche drives us in a direction which remains out of *the readers' focus* most of the time. The investigation of the uncanny becomes possible at the periphery, at the ambivalent points of various aspects – thematic and formal elements – of signification.

The indirect strategies characterising the texts by Hoffmann and Freud needed to be dispelled. Due to the requirements an academic research faces, the practice featured in the discourse of the “Unheimliche”, which involves the subject of the research determining the form of the research, could not have been adopted. (This phenomenon, observed by a historian concerning a non-related topic, was labelled as “parallel processing”. The paper containing this argument also refers to the compulsion to repeat.) After Freud's text which is careful not to go beyond implications on certain issues, my contribution can rather be described as working-through than repetition, as it does its best to surmount the chain of *parallel processing*. Its ambition is not to stop at implications, but formulate factual statements about its not easily definable subject.

The re-telling of “Der Sandmann”'s plot by Freud highlights an omission, which can hardly be considered as insignificant. An entire episode is skipped: in Freud's narrative two events are included as if they had happened only once, though in fact both of them take place repeatedly. (There is even a poem mentioned but not included in the omitted sequence of Hoffmann's text. This solution itself can be interpreted as *unheimlich*, just as the fact that Freud did actually leave it out from his account.) Freud only deals with the contents, the thematic aspect of the narrative.

The chapter entitled *Eyes* clarifies the function of superstition, primordial beliefs in the texts by Hoffmann and Freud. In Hoffmann's narrative bedside stories are juxtaposed with fears and persecution re-emerging in a young adult's life. For Freud this arrangement becomes a pretext to give a partial review of the arguments he elaborated on in *Totem und tabu*. He draws a parallel between individual and collective history (that is, childhood and tribal cults), while maturity of both individual and community is characterised by the retraction of such early concepts.

This chapter describes further theoretical contexts which inform the analysis carried out in my paper. These include: the *gaze* which I interpret as the inversion of the one's perspective, the *compulsion to repeat* as introduced in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* by Freud, and theories about the *identification of the subject*. This latter issue may involve the dissociation of the perception of reality.

This chapter also includes an analysis of Wordsworth's essays on epitaphs, which touches upon non-oppositional structures. This digression becomes an integral part of the dissertation as I refer to Wordsworth's strategy as a counter-example for particular techniques of Hoffmann's. Among the topics of Wordsworth's discussion there is prosopopoeia and the representation of certain experience that are hardly containable by language—elements that are crucial in Hoffmann's text, too, but the strategies through which these are employed in the two texts are radically different. Through Wordsworth's semiotic practice the deadly and the unknown is framed in a harmonic text which arrives at a proper closure.

The chapter entitled *Secret* gives a review of the ambiguous, potentially dangerous origins of storytelling. This Nietzschean approach provides an explanation for the cautious, shy attitude manifesting in Freud's essay, and in the discourse about the *Unheimliche*, as well. Freud only deals with the thematic layer of "Der Sandmann", as if it would be advisable not to get involved with the nature of representation or perspective. We can interpret the power of the letter as something familiar covered by the unknown. The analysis connects the fact that a perception is either consciously realised by the subject or not, and the trace it leaves in the memory either creates *ressentiment* or not. Memories and oblivion – which is reactive (and how)? The ambiguity raised by storytelling makes it possible for real subjection to turn into fictive domination, for the thematic element thought to be unknown (from the outside) to shift into a formal element familiar (from the inside).

The chapter entitled *Shift of Voice* argues that the above described splitting of the perspective and the technical operations, such as shifting and changing of perspective are carried out by terror and loathing. The manipulation of the perspective is triggered by exactly these effects created in the reader, since this type of content produces qualities at the level of the enunciation, that is, it governs textual energy beyond the enounced and operates as

imprintings of states of mind. (Here canonical propositions of German Romanticism can be referred to.)

The reader is animated by the text. This mechanism bears strong resemblance to the tribal act of conjuring. (Cf: S. Greenblatt, M. Mauss.) Communicating a negative thematic element (the character is exposed to misfortune, is inferior, disgusting, etc.) is accompanied by success of form (releases energy for the subject in the text, whoever s/he is, author or reader). In order for a text to remain an efficient energy transmitter (that is, to be able to stand against time), it has to avoid the mechanic patterns or channels of identification, and has to offer intimate routes instead, which provide one with personal versions of avoiding the unwanted.

The text, through activating the thematic systems of memory relating intensive feelings of terror, directs the subject's energy to an area which s/he has a limited number of plots to describe. Thus the choice of associations is shortcut for the subject, and the proto-plots of terror they have in mind, due to their close linguistic relatedness, tend to emerge. They will overpower the tendencies of the signification. While some signifiers leave more space for the interpreter to attach meanings and emotional effects to them, others will trigger signifying processes which, just because of the amount of energy they govern, create shortcuts. If a signifying process demanded more energy than the subject can dispose of at the moment, it is bound to trigger a compulsive reaction in the subject's mind (both feelings and consciousness). Based on this description *unheimlich* effect can be defined as one created by *the signifiers, motives, patterns, scenes or characters* which, through conceiving them, turn familiar and reveal their deeper significance with traumatic suddenness.³ This familiar reference, as it is a piece of psychical reality too intense, will hide the permanent distinctions that inform the interpreter what s/he is facing at the moment—if it is something live / lifeless, real / fictional, if the shock perceived is recent or upcoming, etc. Uncanny signification is articulated as the activity of a mental area which is unusually difficult to verbally conceptualise, contain and envelope.

³ That is, the reader shifts to his own personal experience while responding to the story. Various places in "Der Sandmann" always employ the same choreography to describe terror: it suddenly emerges, floods the subject, then apparently vanishes only to return even more intensely.

The interpretation of “Der Sandmann” is presented in the chapters *Parallel processing* and *Grains of Sand*, from a structural and a thematic point of view, respectively.

The story by Hoffmann, just like the essay by Freud, also follows the logic of parallel processing. The narrator broaches about details of narrative strategies, and he maintains a compulsive attitude regarding his plot, while it would be more reasonable to have the same feeling regarding this digression on narration. A parallelism can be drawn between this displacement and the similarities between the narrator’s and the main character’s temper. The shift in the point of view of the text breaks the reader’s identification, as the first person is first attached to Nathanael, but later on it switches to the narrator.

A pictorial analogy can be unfolded. The notions on metafictionality in “Der Sandmann” present two modes of verbal depicting which are analogous to two strategies for visual representation. The constant scribbling of Nathanael as a child – *black and white, schematic* representation, only outlines – is presented in opposition to the ideal way of storytelling, which, according to the narrator, involves *rich, colourful* treatment, and bold, instinctual gestures. This distinction sheds light on the background of the difference between the beginning and the end of the short story: the beginning is scattered, resembling to a silhouette. The ending, on the contrary, is sharp, purely thematic. (According to Wordsworth’s description, the beginning and the end forms a continuum, they are similar and interconnected. Here in Hoffmann’s narrative they work out as the exact opposite: their characteristics are complementary, they are strikingly different.)

The subject of the story is *losing one’s eyes*. Eyes are associated with the principle of life subjected to displacement. The story implies that Nathanael’s concept also contains an element of artificiality. His attempts at identification and interpersonal relations are inorganic, literary: literature becomes a substitute of reality, and life becomes virtually immersed in the process of creation, representation: “diabolic mimesis” (S. Kofman) is in operation. This condition is broken by the telescope, the “*Perspektiv*” which creates a *division*, and renders double perspective to Nathanael’s perception.

The *Perspektiv* functions as Nathanael’s prosthesis, which, later on turns into a switch between two modes of perception.) The first real success Nathanael experiences in identification happens only after he attained the telescope. The world perceived through the lens maintains the illusion of wholeness, it still seems to be undivided. As if Nathanael were the only character in the text who cares for creating and keeping on a reflective mode of thought (in the philosophic or aesthetic sense, that is, reflections directed towards the self),

while everybody else surrenders to the collective set of values, moral reflection, and invests into collective mechanisms of defense. On a social level, all what takes place in Nathanael's life – in spite of his failure – represents a brave attempt to liquidate the environment created by social compromises. His individual life story and the ups and downs of psychic energy household show an altogether different picture, though: Nathanael's freedom to decide on things or against them, his means to find out about the world outside is inevitably limited by his compulsive behaviour, and the fact that he is subjected to the terror he also acquired from the symbolic.

Hoffmann's narrative makes it clear that Nathanael's perception – which, according to him, is "colourless, veiled", is practically no less accurate than anyone else's who is "sane", that is, who is not thrown into fits from time to time. The text represents opinion forming as regards "human" in the most general sense, which hardly has to do anything with empirical perception.

The telescope – with which Nathanael, as it turns out, keeps on peeping at his own eyes – shows that Nathanael's identification, which is narcissistic, and can only be carried out through an external ego ideal, – the involuntary and unconscious turning away from life, from outside reality – aims at the romantic author's illusion: eternity. This arrangement illustrates the distinction between the operations of the heteropathic / ex-corporative, and ideopathic / incorporative identification.

Nathanael suffers a trauma when he wants to peep on the Sandman, but becomes exposed to him instead. At this moment he is not there where he is, his perspective exits his body (heteropathic identification). The identification with the aggressor taking place is in fact *Nachträglichkeit* ("deferred action"). Nathanael glimpses himself from death's point of view. The speaking subject has to be familiar with the end of the story, so he cannot stand suppressing the beginning. All this necessarily happens just like this – from a first person point of view at first, but, close to the end, from an external perspective – so that the narrator will be able to give an account of the events.

As one is through with reading the narrator's train of thought which redirects him / her to the happenings in real life, s/he can no longer tell if it is the reality unfolding from the text – that is, a linguistic reality existing only in the framework of deceptive figuration – that s/he is facing, or rather the material reality which opposes textuality, the narrative coming to life.

The chapter entitled *Grains of Sand* carries out an in-detail analysis of the plot of “Der Sandmann.” It starts out from the statement that one of the stakes of the text is the encounter between the Sandman and Clara. These two characters are absolutely antithetical. The former is the subject of Nathanael’s mania, while the latter is his – first and repeatedly – chosen one. The topic of the Sandman is subject to such strong tension between Clara and Nathanael which cannot be dealt with through the patterns of communication they share. Their relation is determined by a chain of projections. The problematic features of Clara’s character raise the issues of linguistic representation, problems of language use. Her characterisation reveals stiffness, a particularly static quality on several layers of the text, and it inserts distanciation in the text (which also creates an interplay between the enunciated and enunciation at the same time).

In the last chapter entitled *Conclusions* I start out from the notion that the world view contained less factual elements at the beginning of the 1800’s than it does now. In this situation *prosopopoeia* plays a more important role in everyday life. One conceived anything they did not have an precise concept of, to their own likeness. Thus, the semiotic plurality of Hoffmann’s text does not only derive from the author’s careful attention and creative invention, but from the fact that contemporary readers faced a number of uncertainties as regards the story told.

Hoffmann’s era paid special attention to the *Unheimliche*. In this characteristic – in this virtual *prosopopoeia* – the operation of *parallel processing* must have been involved, as animism turns towards certain topics with such an exquisite interest, one that can even be considered superstitious, and attributes liveliness to patterns – both textual and material – to which nowadays nobody would attribute that.

In Freud’s essay one can feel that scientific discourse in the beginning of the 1900’s could not show any tolerance whatsoever towards superstitious attitudes. Contemporary opinions on these issues were mainly influenced by the circumstance that world views dominated by unsupported beliefs were only recently banished from common thinking, even those of educated communities. Consequently, Freud’s point of view embodies a passionate counter-reaction against the interpretation of the short story by Hoffmann, centred on the category of *intellectual uncertainty*. From the epistemological viewpoint he is ready to support the ideas and effects raised by the *Unheimliche* seem to be *the return of the repressed*. To cut it short: with Freud there is no place for admitted uncertainty: though in Hoffmann’s

time it conveys a multiplicity of meanings, in Freud's interpretation the story has to become unambiguous.

The interests of the subject in the text drive the story towards a negative outcome – the positive energy that stands against time can be accumulated in the narrative through this. The subject is duplicated through this split between the main character and the narrator, the inner and external perspective, the division between form and content (shift of voice). The narrator – though with a compulsive edge, still – gives an account of Nathanael's story voluntarily. The speaking subject necessarily represses that s/he is familiar with the end of the story. This informational deficiency is a structural effect, which is sublimated in the form of the terror contained in the text (while losing its attachment to the first person). Then, as the narration proceeds, the subject gets more and more distanced from the beginning of the story (*Nachträglichkeit*, deferred action is at work), and, on a conscious level, succeeds in getting rid of the possibility that all what is going on may not happen to a character (represented by the third person) but to the self. Part of the narrator's / Nathanael's self becomes possessed, that is, the mortal figure endangering himself identifies with this possessed part of his self, and becomes integrated in the title character, the Sandman. This manifestation finally guarantees his immortality, as it is represented in a motive reviving particular energies again and again. Thus, the relieving closure is missing in order to make certain elements of the text interpreted as *acting-outs*, while other passages as workings-through (*Durcharbeitung*). The effect of the text – the containment and framing of the above described, “hardly communicatable” content in the form of implicit textual energy – is based on the preservation of repetition. The possessed part of the subject of the text, from the point the split takes place, is subjected to a systematic energetic deficiency. The narrator's position, as it is distanced from that of Nathanael, is driven by a series of defense mechanisms (projections, denegations), while the desolated persona gets driven away in “diversions”. The impulse gathered develops into the *Feuerkreis*, raving without restraints. The danger towering up to homicide and suicide gets out of the control expressed in social codes.

I interpreted Hoffmann's short story as the solution to a narratological dilemma. How to depict particular mental conditions which are – theoretically – unable to get familiar with from the first hand, so that they did not lose their attributes which make their communicability problematic? Hoffmann's solution to this problem is radically different than that of Wordsworth, outlined in the example at the beginning of my paper. The latter's account on the nature (*or* culture) of the deathly, the (quasi) unknown is harmonically framed and

definite. On the other hand, Hoffmann's text employs the compulsion to repeat and certain diversions in a way that carries out the *prismatic* dissemination of the signifiers. Through not including a real closure it finally makes the text infinite. This procedure can be read as the paradigm of "parallel processing" (Runia), it represents a psychoanalytical *acting-out*, while using the same terminology Wordsworth's text can be described as (*Durcharbeitung*).

Freud picks "Der Sandmann" as a structure fit to be retold because of its excessive vividness. Because of the fact that – through the element surviving in the title character – it finally protects its own immortality. The author of *Traumdeutung* employs the textual energy of "Der Sandmann" to support his key signifiers, such as Oedipus' story and his own fear of dying. This is the goal that governs the rewriting of Hoffmann's plot he provides in "Das Unheimliche." Freud's essay only accounts for the thematic level of the short story. Consequently, instead of processing / working through the modal aspect of "Der Sandmann," Freud repeats it in his text. This choice of an example by Freud represents a concealed identification with the tasks and responsibilities Nathanael faces. In order to finalise his theoretical content that will supposedly make the repetitive compulsion tangible, Freud has to get himself together. This is the compulsion he imposes on himself, and this is how he becomes able to publish the summary of his meta-psychology focusing on the compulsion to repeat.

Hoffmann's narrative discourse consciously lets the structures of uncertainty trespass its territory. Freud, through the interpretation of "Der Sandmann," a text building up by ellipses and diversions, multiplies the intensity of his own signifying process, and encapsulates his theoretic discourse in the context of romanticism. The duality of *unheimlich* and *heimlich* bears a clear analogy with that of Eros and Thanatos. In "Das Unheimliche" Freud, anticipating the central argument of *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* puts forth an interpretation so that the energy and the constant recurring of the spirit of Hoffmann's short story is directed within the framework of the conceptual limitations defined by his essay.