The phrase chosen as title of this essay might strike many as odd, even somehow at odds with the fundamental grammar within which it can make any sense at all. Just to read “the experience of deconstruction” is already something of a jarring experience. It shakes up everything we thought we could rely on by experience, as experience, from experience. It bids us to imagine the absolute event of experience, a perilous crossing of the perimeter from beyond oneself, beyond the same, beyond all that which repeats as the experience of self. An experience without self, from outside self, an experience without experience itself. Is such a thing even possible? For whom?

If deconstruction can be experienced or an experience, then it seems that this possibility would have to deconstruct some essential notion we have of what experience itself is. If there can be an experience of deconstruction, if such a thing is possible, then that possibility makes for a deconstruction of experience itself. Of our notion of experience but also of our experience of experience. The experience of experience, in other words, the place of a certain repetition, where the singular, one-time experience, which is unlike any other, begins to repeat by means of a figure of sameness. Deconstruction, insofar as it deconstructs such repeating figures, retrieves the traces of some singularity of experience, which is also being remarked through repetition. Repetition, in effect, can be seen to con-figure singularity, give it a name, a name that is a figure – face, voice, gaze. Someone’s. Someone’s. Some one’s. The experience of deconstruction, if such a thing were possible, would be the singular experience of a repeating singularity, always someone’s. But whose? Whose experience is it? To whom does it belong?

These questions (“to whom?,” “to whom does it belong?,” “to whom does it return properly as (a) property?”) have been at the focus of deconstructive thought. This thought has entailed a radical displacement of all the presuppositions implied by the very form of these questions, and hence of the answers to them that have tended to recur. This displacement, I venture to say, is precisely what would have to be jarring about the experience of deconstruction. If it were possible, it would have to be an experience in which the very question of whose experience it is, to whom it belongs or returns, has to remain suspended.

PEGGY KAMUF

THE EXPERIENCE OF DECONSTRUCTION

Such a suspension shakes the perimeters of a grammar in which, for example, the noun “experience” is apt to occur most readily in clauses with the verb “to have” or its cognates, either explicit or implicit. One has experience(s). Experience is something someone, anyone has, acquires, comes to possess. This is a virtual presupposition of the grammar of experience. Experience is presupposed to be that which is appropriated, thus appropriable. Yet, as an appropriable thing, experience is to be considered fundamentally different from other kinds of things that can be had. We maintain (or rather, presuppose) that having (an) experience is not like having a car, brown eyes, or a job. These are had, owned, possessed as some kind of property or by legal title. When one has experience, however, one does not necessarily end up owning anything or having title to anything. If I say “I had an experience,” I mean that something happened to me and not that something came into my possession. And even though one may be said to possess experience, we still make a distinction from other kinds of possessions one may have. So experience is not itself
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properly what we call a possession; rather, it is that which comes to be appropriated as a self, a self-possession, the self one is or has – in other words, repeats.

Experience repeats, we believe. Repeating itself, we further believe, it coheres and becomes continuous over time. Hence, we say of someone “she has experience,” and we usually wish to understand thereby that she has accumulated experiences, over and over, and that through repetition of the same or similar experience, she is now qualified to be called “experienced.” This set of beliefs permits a certain level of reliance on technical expertise and on experts who can produce the model of fully experienced discourse in any technical field. Likewise, if we are reassured by the idea of experienced technicians – surgeons, pilots, auto mechanics – it is no doubt because we call up an image of repeated acts in the course of which the actor has learned to minimize the chance of error or accident. Experience as cumulative through repetition, as constituting a continuity over time (which continuity we call the subject), is the distinguishing trait in play in the difference between experience (abstract singular) and experiences (plural). Yet, what does it mean to say that one experience repeats another and then another and then another, and that each time it is also the same experience, a repetition of the same? What about this trope of repetition whereby plural experiences are said to add up to experience?

By recalling that repetition is a trope, I mean to indicate one place at which to look for a deconstruction of this trait, which accumulates experiences, plural, into experience, abstract general singular. The trope gathers disparate events so that they cohere as a subject unified over time. The unification of the subject happens as an appropriation of a plurality of experiences into its own experience. The instrument, so to speak, of this unifying appropriation, which also reduces plurality to a general singularity, is the trope – or the fiction – of repetition. To call repetition a fiction, however, points us as well to a narrative structure, to narrative as a mode of repetition.² It also raises the question of literary fiction, of fiction in the sense of a written literature. Narrative repetition occurs in literature, of course, but we hold the kind of experience one may have reading such narrative literature to be essentially different from the experience(s) of repetition that happen in reality. There is, we believe, a fundamental difference between the experience of fictional repetition and an experience of repetition “in real life.”

It is this belief that Freud, in his essay “The Uncanny,” sets out to test, in his own best quasi-scientific manner. The etiological question of the essay is: what causes the experience of the uncanny? But Freud, it seems, can approach this question only by dividing the experience he’s investigating into fictional and real occurrences, which he will then attempt to compare so as to determine if there is more than one origin or cause of uncanny sensations. What I propose to do in the rest of this essay is to consider, once again, this argument concerning the uncanny experience of fiction, which Freud persists in wanting to distinguish from real experience. Despite that will, which is the will of empirical, experimental science (the science of real as opposed to fictional experience), “The Uncanny” goes a considerable way toward deconstructing the trait of the difference between the real and the fictional moments of a same experience, and therefore, between my own, someone’s “own” experience and the inappropriately experience of another, who may be a fiction. In the following pages, we will accompany Freud’s essay for a certain distance as it goes about this – quasi-scientific, quasi-fictional – work of deconstruction.

As is well known, Freud ends up associating the quality of feeling called “das Unheimliche” or uncanniness with “something repressed which recurs.”⁵ The essay, in effect, traces the process of the “discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny” (215). It thus has an evident affinity with another text of Freud’s concerned apparently more directly with the repetition compulsion, Beyond the Pleasure Principle. “The Uncanny,” however, is noteworthy because in it Freud also attempts to specify differences between the real and the aesthetic experience of uncanniness, between experience that can be submitted to what he calls “reality-testing” and experience for which no such testing can be performed. By aesthetic experience, Freud seems to have in mind the experience of reading narrative fiction because his examples are all taken from this realm. The essay, then, and for good reason, has repeatedly attracted the attention of literary theorists.
since it appears to address head-on the area of their concern, and to make connections between that concern and the sort of psychic phenomena investigated by psychoanalysis. It is indeed perhaps the only attempt Freud made to come to terms with the specifics of the psychic experience of reading fiction.

It is not at all clear, however, that he really meant to get into such questions. Very near the conclusion of the essay, after having considered "the possibilities of poetic license and the privileges enjoyed by story-writers in evoking or in excluding an uncanGG feeling" (228), that is, all those possibilities that belong to fiction, he concedes that he has "drifted into this field of research half involuntarily." This is an odd remark to find at the end of an essay that begins by announcing its subject to be aesthetics.

It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling... But it does occasionally happen that he has to interest himself in some particular province of that subject; and this province usually proves to be a rather remote one, and one which has been neglected in the specialist literature of aesthetics. (193)

These are the first lines of the essay. With these initial sentences, Freud seems to understand clearly that he is preparing to enter into the subject of aesthetics, albeit a remote province of that subject, and that, however exceptionally or reluctantly, he is doing so deliberately. That is why it is odd to find him musing at the essay's close about how he has drifted "half involuntarily" into the "field of research that studies the devices of storytelling. It is as if, by the end of the essay, he had forgotten that it had been his announced intention at the outset to take up this province of aesthetics.

There are, however, at least two notes struck at the opening of the essay that will resonate with the later image of involuntary drift: a psychoanalyst, writes Freud, only rarely "feels impelled" to investigate the subject of aesthetics ("verspürt nur selten den Antrieb zu ästhetischen Untersuchungen"); and it occasionally happens "that he has to interest himself" in it ("daß er sich für ein bestimmtes Gebiet der Ästhetik interessieren muß"). The essay "The Uncanny" describes itself, then, as having been put into motion under some coercion or compulsion: a feeling-impelled and a having-to-interest-himself. If these marks of coercion manage to sound rather innocuous, it is because Freud has couched them in the third person of scientific discourse. He does not write "I, Freud, feel impelled to speak of the uncanny"; or "I, Freud, have to interest myself in these questions." It is the psychoanalytic investigator, the scientist, the researcher who must do these things, and if he must, it is because science demands it; it is the will of science. But this use of the third person is also a transparent discursive screen for the first person signatory of these lines, for Freud himself, for the one who chooses, for apparently scientific reasons, not to write "I," "I feel impelled," or "I have to interest myself." Such a confessional mode would be most out of place, unscientific, and above all, it would prompt questions as to who or what is impelling me, the writer, to write about uncanny feelings, and by what necessity I have to interest myself in them. As it stands, the opening of the essay is designed to avoid all such questions since their answer is already implied: science makes me do it, I do it for the reasons of science.

Despite the appeal to a strictly scientific proceeding, we can revive the buried question about the force under whose impulse or coercion Freud approached the notion of the uncanny and was attracted to it in the first place. Indeed, Freud's own psychoanalytic procedure encourages us to lift the lid of scientific discourse that he frequently clamped tightly into place in order to secure a place for his discoveries alongside those of astronomy or neurology. He himself just as regularly dispensed with that cover, and this essay is no exception. The investigator, the psychoanalyst, the scientist is also going to acknowledge or confess his own uncanny feelings, although at first he continues to do so under cover of the scientific third person. This device, however, now begins to sound altogether stilted and artificial, a purely conventional manner in which to talk about oneself in all one's peculiarity or singularity. A few paragraphs into the essay, he writes:

The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter, where extreme delicacy of perception would be more in place. It is long since he has experienced or heard of anything
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which has given him an uncanny impression, and he must start by translating himself into that state of feeling, by awakening in himself the possibility of experiencing it. (194)5

This highly self-conscious language is also rather complex in its pragmatic function or performative force. On the one hand, confessing in the third person to “a special obtuseness in the matter” can be a somewhat coy fashion to qualify oneself for this investigation. It suggests that, because he is largely immune to uncanny feelings, we may rely on this investigator to keep a cool, scientific head when speaking of them. On the other hand, the same confession discourages us from pursuing the possibility that the coercion or compulsion under which he is writing could have any resemblance to the kind of uncanny experience he is describing, because, we read, it is “long since” the author has experienced such a thing. So, if we had begun to follow the thread of this possibility from the opening lines, from the feeling-impelled and the having-to-interest-himself, it gets broken off here by Freud’s frank acknowledgment of his insensitivity.

With the passing, rhetorical mention of guilt or accusation, however (“The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to [or charge himself with, accuse himself of] a special obtuseness in the matter” [sich einer besonderen Stumpfheit in dieser Sache anklagen]), we may pick up again the thread of the uncanniness that Freud swears he has not felt in many years. At the very least, the association of uncanniness and guilt may suggest one motive he has in declaring so forthrightly his lack of uncanny experience. This suggestion gathers some force a few pages after the mock self-accusation, when he introduces a brief narration of an uncanny experience of his own. There will be two more such personal experiences of the author recounted in the course of the essay, one of which is consigned to a footnote and the other concerning an experience of reading to which we will return. Of these three, only the first, which I am about to cite, is offered as a first-hand, real experience of the uncanny as distinct from, as Freud puts it, “the uncanny that we merely picture or read about” (224). Here is the well-known narrative:

As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another détour at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery. (212-13)

Given what Freud has earlier said about his particular obtuseness to uncanny feelings (and thus his lack of first-hand experience), we may suppose he recounts here one of the rare occasions when his obtuseness was overcome, and perhaps even the only occasion. In any case, it is given this status in the essay and if only for that reason it has the force of not just any example. Instead, it is the only example of what the subject of this investigation himself refers to when he speaks of an uncanny feeling experienced in real life, one he felt without having to translate himself into that state of feeling, as he says he must now do given his acquired insensitivity. It is also, of course, an example of uncanniness that owes nothing to fiction, since it really did happen to someone real and not just in fiction or by means of a fiction.

Or so Freud appears to believe.

He offers no commentary on the episode, which is introduced to reinforce the point about “the factor of the repetition of the same thing.” a notion that he fears “will perhaps not appeal to everyone as a source of uncanny feeling” (212). Having concluded the account, and without pausing for commentary, he goes on to list similar, but generic experiences: being lost in a mist and returning to the same spot or wandering in a darkened room and repeatedly bumping into the same piece of furniture. Neither of these generic examples, however, share the feature that makes Freud’s narrative so telling: the feature of the sexually marked character of the place to
which he returns under his compulsion to repeat. It is almost as if, by putting his experience on such a list, he were distracting attention from this feature, which he has nevertheless placed in clear view, as clearly in view as the painted women seen at the windows of the small houses. Or, put another way, it is as if Freud were pointing to the repeated involuntary return to the same place as in itself uncanny, which manifestly is insufficient to account for what he experienced in an unfamiliar provincial town in Italy.

I am not suggesting, of course, that Freud missed the most obvious thing about his own anecdote; rather, I want merely to underscore that he appears to cite it (that is, repeat it) solely because it illustrates the involuntary repetition of an action. Doubtless he considers the connection to go without saying between his uncanny experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, the psychoanalytic account he offers of uncanniness: that it is “something repressed which recurs,” that it “proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed” (224), or that it “proceeds from repressed infantile complexes” (225). All of these formulations could no doubt account for the way in which the specific features of Freud’s experience produced a feeling of uncanniness. In other words, the theory conforms well to the experience and finds confirmation there that the uncanny is not just a repetition but a repetition of what ought to have remained hidden or repressed (hence guilt), so that the act of repetition is itself the means whereby the repressed returns. Despite, however, this excellent fit between Freud’s theory and his experience (which, of course, is anything but surprising), there remain some features of the experiential anecdote that may not be altogether compatible with the theoretical framework of the essay. I will try to spell these out briefly.

As already mentioned, one of Freud’s aims in this essay is to distinguish the uncanny aesthetic experience from the uncanny real experience. A general theory of the uncanny would have to account for both but it would also have to be able to locate the dividing line of their distinction. For Freud, this line seems to fall in an entirely conventional way between literary fiction and lived, real experience. More generally we could say it falls between, on the one hand, fictions, which we experience in a fashion that must fail the test of reality, and, on the other hand, any experience that passes the reality test for the subject of the experience. This distinction is never questioned by Freud; it is simply taken for granted.

In this, he seems to rely on a stable category of fiction, which is defined, analyzed, and studied by the discipline of aesthetics. This is the domain he drifts into half involuntarily when he tries to work out the specific differences between an uncanny experience produced by real life and one produced by fiction. Just as he did in that unnamed provincial town in Italy, at some point in the course of the essay he crossed over the line separating aesthetics from real life (which suggests that not only the experience of reading but the experience of writing as well can produce uncanny effects on a subject).

Despite all that, despite the fact that the essay began its drift into the “subject of aesthetics” from its very first words, the theory has no difficulty, apparently, maintaining the distinction of the real and the fictional. But can we say the same for the real experience and the experience of the real that this theory is meant to account for? Does that experience as recounted remain altogether within the category of real versus fictional experience of uncanniness? What if the so-called “real” experience had to remark within itself the “unreal” from which it is to be distinguished? In what sense would it still be, through and through, a real experience?

These questions come down, perhaps, to wondering at what point, in his aesthetic wanderings through a provincial Italian town, Freud crossed over from the province of the beautiful into the area of the uncanny. As a tourist, he has no doubt gone to Italy for its many beauties, the beauties of its plastic arts. He did so often in his youth, and then later he would be repeatedly drawn to these arts of the beautiful in his writings. Thus, despite what the psychoanalyst had said at the beginning of the essay, it is more than “only rarely” that he has felt impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics. 6 In these investigations, moreover, he showed a marked predilection for Italian art: the Moses of Michelangelo and the painting of Leonardo, not to mention all the mythological lore and sculptural remains of Pompeii, Signorelli, etc. Now, the anecdote in the unnamed provincial town will have most likely occurred under the impulse of attraction to these monuments to beauty where they reside in Italy. In the course of one of his tourist walks, he
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came upon some painted women, only they were not
the painted women of Signorelli or Leonardo, they
were not the Virgin and St Anne, they were not even
representations of the artist's grandmother or step-
mother; rather, these women were painted artlessly,
vulgarily, and did not reside in museums or churches
but in small, mean houses, houses of the *vulgum pecus.*

At what point does the uncanny experience with
the painted women *really* begin? The narrative
suggests that it is at the point at which he returns for
a second time to the ill-famed quarter; the first time
he wanders into this part of town, he sees quickly
that he has deviated from his aim, which is to look
at beautiful art; right away he sees that the painted
women are not painted artfully, but with the bald-
headed urgings of sex. "Nothing but painted women
were to be seen at the windows of the small houses,
and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next
turning." The second time, and the first repetition,
he does not see just the women but sees himself also
seen by them; what is more, they see his desire, they
see what has carried him back their way: "I suddenly
found myself back in the same street, where my
presence was now beginning to excite attention."
This is not yet uncanny, just embarrassing, too
revealing, like being in one of those dreams where
one walks about in public half dressed. (And,
indeed, immediately before launching into his anec-
dotal example, Freud has noted that this sort of
uncanniness "recalls the sense of helplessness expe-
rienced in some dream-states.") It is not until his
third passage through the same street, and the
second repetition, that Freud is overcome by the
uncanny feeling. Because this experience is cited to
reinforce his point about the repetition of the same
thing as source of uncanny feeling, the narrative
marks clearly the onset of uncanniness at the point
of the second repetition, the repetition of what is
already a repetition.

All of this supposes, however, that the series of
repetitions begins when Freud first enters the ill-
famed quarter. That is, it begins with the first sight-
ing of the painted women. But can we in fact make
such a supposition?

The serialization of the repetition poses problems,
which are to a certain extent strictly logical prob-
lems. If we suppose that the first sight of the painted
women begins the series, then we must also assume

that this is the point at which Freud begins to cross
from the region of his aesthetic tourism to the nether
region of the uncanny. But if he only begins to cross
here, that means he has not yet fully entered into the
region of the uncanny; it is not yet an uncanny expe-
rience. Nevertheless, in order to experience the
uncanny sensation in the third moment as he does,
he will also already have had to cross over the line
into the series without realizing it. When one realizes
it, it has already happened. It has already happened
in the first moment, without happening yet as an
event for consciousness. Consciousness will come
only after the fact, after the experience. This means
that the experience will not have been anyone's
properly conscious experience. The beginning of the
series will never have been a beginning in conscious-
ness until it has already been repeated. The begin-
n ing is constituted only after the fact, after it has
been repeated. Which means that at the beginning,
from the first, there will have already been repeti-
tion. Nothing here begins by beginning but only by
repeating.

Another way to put this would be: the narrated
series has or is given a beginning only as a fiction.
The episode that Freud recounts as a real experience
depends on this fiction to constitute it as experience,
and as the experience of a series that has a beginning
(as well as an end). In reality, the reality as experi-
enced, nothing began until it began to repeat; in the
fiction, however, it began as a narrative would begin:
from the beginning, its first words signal the impending
event of what will only later be the first of a
series: "As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon,
through the deserted streets of a provincial town in
Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a
quarter..." What begins here is a fictional experience,
not because it never happened, but because the one
who is portrayed as the subject of the experience, the
one who was walking without knowing where he was
going and found himself in a certain quarter of the
town, this subject never existed in any present
moment of the past that was also present to itself. In
the phrases "As I was walking" and "I found
myself," the "I" is a figure of the narration, that is,
of the device whereby experiences are made to begin
repeating each other. As such, the "I" corresponds to
no one and nothing but this narration. It is a fiction.

The point is that the narration simply is, that is,
constitutes or invents the experience as real and
really lived. Which is also why the uncanny sensation arises at the same moment as the possibility of narrating a series of repetitions, the moment of the second repetition. It arises, that is, when, between the reality of an experience and a fiction, the distinction can no longer be strictly made.

So, essentially, the feature unaccounted for by Freud’s theoretical modeling of the uncanny here would be this irreducible reliance on the fiction that narrates an experience no one present to himself in the real ever had as such. This is not to say, of course, that Freud discounts fiction as a source of uncanny feeling. On the contrary, he speaks at length about fiction in general, and about several fictional works in particular; one such text is even cited as having been the occasion for him of a quite remarkable experience of the uncanny. This is the only other example from his own experience of uncanniness that Freud cites in the essay. It concerns his reading of a “naïve enough story” out of a magazine that just happened to fall into his hands:

In the middle of the isolation of war-time [Mitten in der Absperrung des Weltkrieges] a number of the English Strand Magazine fell into my hands [kam eine Nummer des englischen Magazins “Strand” in meine Hände]; and I read a story about a young married couple who move into a furnished house in which there is a curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it. Towards evening an intolerable and very specific smell begins to pervade the house; they stumble over something in the dark; they seem to see a vague form gliding over the stairs — in short, we are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort. It was a naïve enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable. (221)9

It would be tempting to analyze this passage in the light of what we just discovered about such uncanny narratives. Once again there would be questions to ask about its beginning. Does the uncanny experience begin only after Freud has begun to read it in the magazine or already when the magazine “fell” or came into his hands? Why does he note the circumstances of his coming to read this story? Perhaps he merely wanted to waylay any derogatory judgments of his taste in reading; it was “[i]n the middle of the isolation of war-time,” he notes, as if to explain that one had to read whatever fell into one’s hands. But, if that is the reason for beginning this way, the explanation it implies is far from evident. On the other hand, there seems to be little doubt that Freud assumes that the quite remarkable uncanny feeling produced by the story had nothing to do with reality for the story’s reader. This he does when he mocks the premises of the fiction: “in short, we are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort.” In other words, it was a wholly artificial production, possible only in fiction, although the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkably real. Because the premise of ghostly crocodiles or “wooden monsters come to life” is so absurd, Freud refers the uncanniness produced by the fiction to primitive animism, that is, “to modes of working of the mental apparatus that have been surmounted” (221). While residual animistic beliefs can also produce uncanny sensations in real life, at least for the most primitive among us, fiction is better able to exploit these beliefs because, once again, it cannot be submitted to reality-testing; hence “there are many more means for creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life” (226).

Freud’s argument, of course, is indisputable as long as one understands the term fiction to have only its most conventional reference to a coded genre of narrative, to fictions published and presented as such. Because he intends this conventional reference, he can confidently invoke a distinction between fiction and real life. But we have seen that things are not quite so simple when, in order to account for and give an account of so-called real life, he must have recourse to the fictional device that is his own narrative. Here the distinction cannot be made; “real life” gets remarked as a fiction and suspends the simple opposition. When the suspension or, more precisely, the deconstruction of this distinction happens, as it did to Freud in Italy, one receives the sort of jolt Freud calls the uncanny.

Perhaps, however, this simply is the uncanny experience; wherever it occurs, it simply is the experience of the deconstruction of the distinction between fiction and real life. If so, then it would be
pointless to try to differentiate uncanny effects in fiction from the same effects in real life. Yet Freud presumes it is necessary to do so. Why? Well, principally, it would seem, to save the scientific theory, to save it as scientifically valid. To do so, one must be able to answer all contradictions of the hypothesis being put forward. And as Freud notes, nearly all these contradictions arise from the possibilities realized only in fiction: “nearly all the instances that contradict our hypothesis,” he writes, “are taken from the realm of fiction, of imaginative writing. This suggests that we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about” (224). We should so differentiate, in order to answer the contradictions, but can we? If uncanniness arises from somewhere on the site of the deconstruction of that distinction, then it is one of the possible names we can give to the experience of that deconstruction. It is the experience we think we saw happening to the subject of the so-called real-life uncanny experience in Italy.

We have not yet, however, shown how such a deconstruction may also leave its traces in the experience of reading fiction, as it is conventionally represented. True, we have wondered, with regard to the haunting crocodile story, whether the quite remarkable uncanny feeling it could produce in its reader had something to do with the real circumstances of that reader’s life at the moment, the isolation of wartime. We can entertain such questions about the anecdote but we cannot go anywhere with them since Freud himself saw no reason to raise them. What is more, this example reduces fiction to its most conventional, even primitive, level. The reading experience there is a self-described naïve one, merely a device, perhaps, to distract oneself from isolation in the midst of war. But there is, of course, another reading experience recounted in this essay, one which apparently bears little resemblance to the kind of naïve reading Freud indulged in perhaps out of some haunted desperation. It is his reading of the story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, “The Sandman,” which also presents the essay’s most extended analysis of an uncanny experience. To conclude, then, let us turn briefly to this famous reading.

It is introduced into the essay by way of Freud’s disagreement with Jentsch. Jentsch had argued some years earlier that the uncanny effect produced by Hoffmann’s tale can be traced to uncertainty about whether a character in a fiction is a human being or an automaton. Thus, for Jentsch, the uncanniness in the tale arises from Nathanael’s having taken the doll Olympia for a living girl, which allows the more naïve reader (or the reader who reads the tale only once) to do the same. Freud is going to argue that the uncanniness produced by “The Sandman” has quite another source in addition to the ontological or intellectual uncertainties about Olympia. This other and more important source of the uncanny is also its main theme, the theme named by its title.

But I cannot think – and I hope most readers of the story will agree with me – that the theme of the doll Olympia, who is to all appearances a living being, is by any means the only, or indeed the most important, element that must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story. Nor is this atmosphere heightened by the fact that the author himself treats the episode of Olympia with a faint touch of satire and uses it to poke fun at the young man’s idealisation of his mistress. The main theme of the story is, on the contrary, something different, something which gives it its name, and which is always re-introduced at critical moments: it is the theme of the “Sand-Man” who tears out children’s eyes. (202)

It is doubtless correct to say that the Sandman theme is the main one of the story, and that Olympia’s appearance to Nathanael is episodic and brief, compared to the repeated sightings he has of the Sandman or his avatars. With Freud’s remark about the “touch of satire” accompanying the Olympia episode, however, he all but dismisses it entirely as a source of uncanniness for the reader, who is meant to pick up enough of the satiric hints to be able to laugh along with the author at a young man’s “idealisation of his mistress.” This sensitivity to satire, we must suppose, is the trace of Freud’s own experience of reading the Olympia episode. It implies that, because of the satiric tone, the episode did not arouse, in his experience, an uncanny feeling, or at least nothing to compare with the uncanny feeling associated with the returning theme of the Sandman. The same reader who can, along with the author, mock Nathanael’s idealization receives no
such hints to laugh off his idea or *idée fixe* concerning the Sandman as likewise an idealization, that is, an idea, a fiction, even a madness. Freud’s argument concerning the source of the reader’s, that is, first of all his own, uncanny sensation is that as readers we “know that we are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman’s imagination” when we, along with Nathanael, look at the Sandman; hence, for this reader, that is, for Freud, no less than for Nathanael, “Coppola the optician really is the lawyer Coppélius and also, therefore, the Sand-Man” (206). This is the premised reality of both the fiction and the reading of the fiction.

Rather than try to paraphrase this argument any further, I will cite at some length Freud’s explanation for his own and therefore any reader’s uncanny sensation, which concludes the refutation of Jentsch.

Uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate, which admittedly applied to the doll Olympia, is quite irrelevant in connection to this other, more striking instance of uncanniness. It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation... But this uncertainty disappears in the course of Hoffmann’s story, and we perceive that he intends to make us, too, look through the *demon optician’s spectacles or spy-glass* — perhaps, indeed, that the author in his very own person once peered through such an instrument. For the conclusion of the story makes it quite clear that Coppola the optician really is the lawyer Coppélius and also, therefore, the Sand-Man.

There is no question, therefore, of any intellectual uncertainty here: we know now that we are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman’s imagination, behind which we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree. (205-06, italics added)

When Freud writes “we perceive that [Hoffmann] intends to make us, too, look through the demon optician’s spectacles or spy-glass,” he is taking, that is, repeating a significant figure from the tale in order to characterize the conditions under which the reader reads it. Like Nathanael, the tale’s reader, claims Freud, is made to see that Coppola really is Coppélius, really is the Sandman, and that therefore the Sandman really is, that he really is not just a fiction or figment of anyone’s imagination. There is this ontological certainty because the reader, like Nathanael, looks through a particular instrument. But in Freud’s borrowed metaphor of the spyglass as the instrument of reading, what exactly in the act of reading corresponds to the instrument? In other words, what allows Freud to appropriate this instrument as a figure of the reader’s perception, that is, of his experience?

Let us recall that the “demon optician’s spectacles or spy-glass” refers in “The Sandman” to the wares of the optician Coppola, in whom Nathanael sees the return of his childhood nemesis, Coppélius, alias the Sandman. It therefore refers as well to the specific spyglass or pocket telescope Nathanael buys from Coppola and through which he immediately proceeds to look at Olympia. It is the same telescope Nathanael has in his pocket when he ascends the tower with Clara in the tale’s final scene. He looks through it and sees Clara in a way that causes his own eyes to roll and precipitates his unsuccessful attempt to throw her over the parapet before he does succeed in throwing himself to his death. Nathanael is never described as looking at anyone or anything other than Olympia and, briefly, Clara, through Coppola’s telescope. Now, can one tell whether this fact is at all significant in Freud’s choice of the figure? Is it, in other words, a feature that, in his own description, corresponds to some feature of the reader’s own experience? I think we must say it does not and even that Freud takes up the instrument only in order to *turn it away* from Olympia and point it instead at Coppola/Coppélius. It is on their troubling identity and reality that he trains the figurative power to collapse the difference between what Nathanael sees and what the reader must also see, which is likewise the instrument’s power to telescope encounters with different characters, therefore different experiences, into Nathanael’s experience with solely the Sandman, the figure who threatens to tear out children’s eyes. The links are thus put in place that will lead Freud from this telescoping figure to what he designates as the “substitutive relation between the eye and the
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male organ” (206) and thus to the dread of castration portrayed as a fear for one’s eyes. This is the source of the strongest uncanny sensation produced by the tale, insists Freud; it is what recurs that ought to have remained secret, hidden, heimlich, repressed. It is not merely a residual animistic belief, like some wooden monsters coming to life, such as may be provoked in naive fiction. It is an uncanny sensation aroused by “repressed infantile complexes,” which recur in the form of a repetition. As such, it is exactly like what can happen in real life, and Freud even suggests that the story may be a transposition of the author’s experience, the blinding oedipal experience of having himself “in his very own person once peered through such an instrument.”

This figurative pattern, installed by the borrowed telescope, easily confirms Freud’s reliance on the instrument of castration, which is both a theory, a theoretical instrument that can cut through to “repressed infantile complexes,” and an instrument that cuts or threatens to cut flesh, and thus (into) the real; it would cut for real and cut into the real. The telescope cuts by collapsing the apparent distance between seer and seen, subject and object, but also, as an instrument of reading or writing, between reader and character, character and author, and so forth. Furthermore, one could show that the instrument Freud borrows from Hoffmann’s tale gives the focus to all of his cutting operations throughout the essay, and principally to all those concerned with the differentiation of “fiction” and “real life.” It is as if all these distinctions were being made under threat of what will happen if one doesn’t clearly make the separation. “[W]e should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about.” Yes, we should, it is a duty, a debt owed, we ought to do so. Otherwise, not only is our theory weakened but the very eyes with which we try to see clearly are threatened, the eyes of the one Nietzsche called “theoretical man.” In order to see anything at all, we theoretical men (sic) must, we ought to see the difference between real experience and experience happening to some other which “we merely picture or read about.”

If, as we have argued, this differentiation may ultimately be impossible, then perhaps the uncanny records the experience of that nondifferentiation and therefore the deconstruction of the distinction between “real life” experience and “fictional” experience—and thus between “my own” experience and that of another who, for example, waits at the window of a small house and there catches sight—not once, not twice, but three times—of someone walking blindly “one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy...” So begins the fiction of “my own” experience, which is immediately not only mine but also another’s.

It is uncannily like the experience of deconstruction, that is, the deconstruction of experience.

What is it, finally, about “The Uncanny” or about its problematic that it can come to function virtually as another name for deconstruction, and for deconstruction as experience? Notice that, with its very title, “The Uncanny” displays the uncanny doubling it would attempt to analyze, for it names at once the essay itself and the theme of the essay, its object. Like any title, it splits its reference, putting forever into an abyss the one and only one named. This is what Freud also describes as his real experience of uncanniness. Self-reference, the very experience of self, must come to depend on a fiction, a narrative wherein the trope of repetition can stand in as a figure for the self, which is not self-present but absent from itself. By insisting that this uncanny repetition may be read right away in the title, I am trying to account for the experience of reading such a text, which calls itself “The Uncanny,” and thereby names whatever one encounters in the experience of reading it. (Or in the experience of writing it: as we noticed, Freud seems to have been uncannily drawn to his subject.) For Freud, however, it is axiomatic that such an uncanny reading experience is not real experience, and this axiom will be left standing even though his reading of “The Sandman” turns on the moment in which the reader uncannily is made to see exactly what Nathanael sees: the identity of the Sandman figures. This is the significance of his turning the viewing/reading instrument away from Olympia, who is unreal, a mere fiction or simulacrum of a girl. Even when we merely “picture or read about” it, the uncanny is experienced as real. And yet, for Freud, reading, and above all the reading of fiction, is to be distinguished from real experience. This is where his “deconstruction” of experience, which he calls the uncanny, confirms
and accepts a limit that later deconstructive thought will not leave intact.

Freud, however, will have done more than just glimpsed, through his own fictional looking glass, this further deconstruction on the limits of real experience. In some very real sense, he will have experienced its necessity.

notes

1 Jean-Luc Nancy recalls the origins of the word "experience" (peière, ex-perin) and revives its links to perilousness, periculum (trial, attempt, proof, danger, risk), as well as to pirates (pirates), those who operate beyond the limit (peira) of a certain law. It is this expropriating piracy within fundamental experience that Nancy emphasizes in his reflection on the experience of freedom: "In a sense, which might be the primary and ultimate sense here, freedom as the very thing of thought does not let itself be appropriated but only 'pirated': its 'take' will always be illegitimate." L'Expérience de la liberté (Paris: Gallièe, 1988) 25; my translation. A more extensive, less provisional approach to the questions raised here would have to trace out not only Nancy's continued reliance on the term experience (once it has been wrenched out of its positivist sense) but also Derrida's. A possible place to begin the latter task might be in the essay "Signature Event Context" where Derrida proposes to extend the law of the grapheme, that is, of the "differential mark cut off from its putative 'production' or origin" to all "experience" (10). He writes: "And I shall even extend this law to all 'experience' in general if it is conceded that there is no experience consisting of pure presence but only of chains of differential marks" ("Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in Limited Inc [Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988] 10). Some time later, Derrida begins to refer to deconstruction as the experience of the impossible.

2 Narrative theory is a theory of repetition inasmuch as it depends on what Didier Coste calls "the narrative paradox," namely: "In order to understand 'X has changed,' I have to accept that X remains X whether p or ~p is true about it." For Coste, as for most narratologists, X represents a subject, "a character." See his Narrative as

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3 "The Uncanny" in Freud, Writings on Art and Literature, ed. Neil Hertz (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 217; the German text is found in Gesammelte Werke, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1966) 229-68.

4 Most recently, Samuel Weber has discussed the essay in "Uncanny Thinking" (forthcoming as the introduction to a new edition of his Legend of Freud [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982]). He observes that very little has been written on uncanniness within psychoanalysis itself.

The Uncanny, das Unheimliche, remains as abseitig, as marginal a topic as it was when Freud first wrote on it. Perhaps because it is not simply a "topic," much less a "concept," but rather a very particular kind of scene: one which would call into question the separation of subject and object generally held to be indispensable to scientific and scholarly inquiry, experimentation and cognition. (unpublished ms.)

(We should point out that Weber's essay also has the signal merit of recalling Heidegger's important reliance on the term "unheimlich" in Sein und Zeit and elsewhere.) Within literature and philosophy, however, "The Uncanny" has aroused intense interest. See, in particular, Weber's own earlier essay, "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," MLN 88 (1973); Sarah Kofman, "Le double e(s) le diable," in Quatres romans analytiques (Paris: Galilée, 1974); Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche," New Literary History (spring 1976); and Neil Hertz, "Freud and 'The Sandman'," in The End of the Line (New York: Columbia UP, 1985). As for Derrida, he has repeatedly signaled his attentive reading of Freud's essay. He even suggests in a note that "The Double Session" is "in sumi" a rereading of "Das Unheimliche" (Dissemination [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981] 220, n. 32). There are two further notes in "The Double Session" that invoke Freud's essay, one of which gestures toward the problematic we have taken up here: "It should not be forgotten," Derrida remarks, "that in Das Unheimliche, after having borrowed all his material
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from literature, Freud strangely sets aside the case of literary fictions that include supplementary resources of Unheimlichkeit" (268, n. 67).

5 Ja, der Autor dieser neuen Unternehmung muß sich einer besonderen Stumpfheit in dieser Sache anklagen, wo große Feinfülligkeit eher am Platze wäre. Er hat schon lange nichts erlebt oder kennen gelernt, was ihm den Eindruck des Unheimlichen gemacht hätte, muß sich erst in das Gefühl hineinversetzen, die Möglichkeit desselben in sich wachrufen. (Gesammelte Werke, vol. 12, 230)

6 See Writings on Art and Literature, which includes in the appendix a “List of Writings by Freud Dealing Mainly or Largely with Art, Literature or the Theory of Aesthetics,” 263. There are 22 items on the list.

7 In an incomparably fine reading of Freud’s essay, which she likens to a “strange theoretical novel” (525), Hélène Cixous touches on this episode and its degrees of repetition not yet recognized as such by its author, or rather by its victim. She writes: and Freud wanders—in obsessive turns. One other winding, and instead of the distress which Freud claims to have experienced, we should be confronted with the irresistible comedy of Mark Twain. Question: how many repetitions are necessary before distress turns into comedy? The “degree” of repetition supposes the type of reflection that Freud scrupulously refrains from undertaking: he wants to remain sexually on this side of ridicule... (“Fiction and Its Phantoms,” op. cit., 540)

8 The irreducible necessity of this fiction is remarked but also covered over by the hypothesis of unconscious functioning. It is finally perhaps this hypothesis that would be at stake for Freud in the distinction of real from fictional experience, since one must not be left to conclude that the unconscious is a fiction.

9 The story Freud read appears to have been a tale by L.G. Moberly titled “Inexplicable” and published in The Strand in 1917. It has recently been collected in Strange Tales from The Strand, ed. Jack Adrian (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991). My thanks to Kathleen Chapman and Michael Du Plessis for spotting it.

10 Such reading experience may be termed primitive in a strict sense: a primary experience, a first and then sole experience. The crocodile story, Freud understands, would not sustain a similar effect upon a second reading. A primitive reading experience is one that cannot be repeated to the same effect, because this effect depended above all on one remaining ignorant of the story’s end. Those fictions we call literary, on the other hand, bear up under repeated readings. Literature, in the modern sense, is quite simply the institution of (its own) repetition, its self-disseminating, self-(dis)possession in multiple copies, editions, and critical readings.

11 For more sustained engagements with this reading, see the essays by Kofman, Cixous, Weber and Hertz cited above.

12 Referring to the final scene on the parapet, Sam Weber writes: “Freud, it seems, has eyes only for the Sand Man: fascinated, he stares at him and simply refuses to see Clara. Not so poor Nathanael” (“The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment,” op. cit., 112).

13 In The Birth of Tragedy §15.

14 Sarah Kofman was perhaps the first to signal this possible renaming when in 1974 she titled a long essay on Derrida “Un philosophe ‘unheimlich’” (reprinted in Lectures de Derrida [Paris: Galilée, 1984]).

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