

The Intimate*¹

"Not one other has emerged except from traumatism: Man is born misunderstood (*malentendu*)." J. Lacan²

The Real of the Experience

We are all indebted to Freud and Lacan for having transmitted to us the importance of the Real of our experience, and must now in turn accept responsibility for accounting for the stakes it implies. This is something that does not go without saying. Ever-elusive, it is something impossible to locate and just when we think, per the ego's logic, that we may yet arrive at displacing it, we inevitably realize it is it which has displaced us. What enables the psychoanalyst to not seek to discharge himself of this burden? What does it mean to charge oneself with it?

For my part, I am indebted to Alain Didier-Weill for having also shown me the traces of this Real in his writings and our frequent exchanges, which first began at the *Apertura* conference on "*Der Witz* and Interpretation" in Strasbourg, April 1989.

I shall therefore endeavor here to transmit the enigma of this experience from the perspective of the existence of an encounter typically veiled by the ego, but which may be unveiled in those moments when a recognition of the Real, of a secret relation to a radical exteriority which it remains for me to define, becomes possible.

From "Heimlich" to "Unheimlich" and back again

Freud wrote "*Das Unheimliche*"³ in 1919, which term was later translated into French as "disturbing strangeness" (*inquiétante étrangeté*). In this text Freud argued the transformation of something from "Heimlich," (or "familiar") to "Unheimlich" (or "hidden")⁴ results from the process of secondary repression, as indicated in German by the prefix "un-" itself. The trouble is this "secreting away" is undone when "repressed infantile complexes are reanimated by external impressions."⁵ When this occurs "everything that should have remained hidden"⁶ suddenly appears again in the light of day, the "Unheimlich" effects an "anxiety-ridden return"⁷ when the boundaries laid down by secondary repression falter.

This entire construction is based on a passage in the text where Freud establishes the idea of a continuity between the unconscious and conscious minds that is regulated by the economy of the pleasure-unpleasure principle. He consistently clung to this idea of an unconscious constituted by secondary repression, of unconscious as memory, to which he refers in order to establish the concept of a

¹ An initial version of this paper entitled "Heimlich-Unheimlich" was presented to a conference in Besançon on "The Secret Dialectic of the Freudian Unconscious," November 10-11, 2001. In the aftermath this elaboration concerning "The Intimate" was revealed.

² J. Lacan, Seminar "Le malentendu," (*Misunderstanding*) 10/06/80.

³ Freud, "The Uncanny" in *Essais de psychanalyse appliquée*. Idées-Gallimard, pp. 163-210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

passage from “Heimlich” to “Unheimlich,” and back again.

Crucially for our purposes however, Freud remains unsatisfied by this conceptualization of a back and forth movement overseen by the ego, whose failure at this or that moment would supposedly result in the appearance of an experience of the “Unheimlich” in conscious thinking. Courageously, he owns up to his embarrassment on this issue, which for us constitutes a welcome starting point.

The Call of the Symbolic Father

Why, he wonders for example, does the malevolent father figure of the “Sandman” incessantly return, first as Coppeluis and then as Coppola? What terrible knowledge does his gaze convey, transfixing Nathaniel and driving him to scream and eventually commit suicide?

Freud was struck by something in this that he felt escaped him, the way the Sandman was always depicted as a “disturber of love.”⁸ He sensed this idea was significant, insofar as it diminished the efficacy of the “legitimate borders” laid down by secondary repression, which are unable to withstand the return of “primitive convictions, previously relegated away, now seeking recognition.”⁹ What had he stumbled upon here leading him to invoke the idea of the “return of the dead?”¹⁰

According to my argument Freud was headed towards uncovering the transcendence of the Symbolic law that fundamentally prevails over the everyday rules set down by magistrates, who base themselves on what is considered acceptable in the eyes of the human law’s pre-ordained universe. What he did not realize therefore was that he was on the verge of re-encountering the “disturbing strangeness” which had already visited him twenty years earlier in his texts on the power and logic of the signifier that goes beyond signification or meaning.

Why was he not able to hear the call, issued to whomever it may concern, of this transcendent father who was masked by the malevolent figure of the paternal ghost, but who was nonetheless more imposing than the image of the father to whom our Oedipal loves and hostilities are addressed? Although this is the hallmark of a stumbling block in Freud’s practice, his teaching does not stop there, insofar as Lacan’s elaboration of it made it possible to methodically differentiate between the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary registers in a way that brought the existence of this Symbolic father to light, and also made it possible to account for his origins in language, that is to say his nomination as Signifier of the Name-of-the-Father and his transmission through fear. What is the result of this for my argument here?

The return of the Sandman was traumatic for Nathaniel because he was unable to relate to this Symbolic Father’s transcendence, but instead came in contact with the Father in the Real, meaning a father who resides in what he viewed as an accursed outside, a dominion governed by the law of persecution. This inability was related to the fact that a part of his own innermost being, which Lacan also called the Real, was seeking symbolization, and these two Reals came into sudden and unspoken contact in a way that transfixed him. The scream he then let out was characteristic of how people respond in these instances while they are still able to, whereas his suicide was clearly his way of offering himself up completely to the fascination of this dark God in the Real.

⁸ Ibid., p. 182.

⁹ Ibid., p. 205, translation mine.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

In fact what this experience of the transference, in which Freud's feeling of upheaval may be situated, really shows is that a "knowledge in the Real... which speaks of the Truth but without saying it,"¹¹ constitutes an absolute demand... But how are we supposed to hear a demand that is silent? At the end of his text he reveals the road he plans to take by appealing, a second and final time, "*Encore*,"¹² to "loneliness, silence and darkness,"¹³ and leaves us to do what we will with this hand he has dealt.

What struck Freud here left a permanent impression, and in a way nothing was the same again. A new set of stakes had been raised, and the "Beyond of the Pleasure Principle" had made its debut. Feelings of angst accompanied by "das Unheimlich" were no longer connected to a return of the secondarily repressed. Instead their appearance was related to an other time that permanently eludes our memory. Because this new set of stakes escapes the ego's conscious oversight, the best way for us to grasp it is to allow ourselves to be taken unawares by its presence in a formation of the unconscious that stems from a moment when the ego has been eclipsed – the dream. The particular dream I intend to examine in this light is the one Freud discussed in the opening pages of Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the dream that "A Child is Burning."

The Dream and the Coherency of the Eye of Conscience

A father is watching over the body of his son who has just died after a long illness. Tired, he leaves him in the care of an old man and then, after several hours of sleep, has the following dream:

He sees his son standing next to his bed, and then his son takes him by the arm and says to him with a tone of reproach: "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" Immediately awoken, he runs into the adjoining room and is gripped by the vision of flames burning a corner of the pallet upon which his son is laid out. What does this dream mean?

Based on the manifest content, it would seem his sleeping perception of the real fire suddenly awoke him and left an indelible impression. The flames he then saw transfixed him because of the remorse his conscience associated them with – the reality of the fact that the unhappy accident of the candle tipping over could have been avoided had he and/or the old man not fallen asleep.

Arresting though this spectacle may be, it may easily lead us to forget the fact that the dream itself can lead elsewhere. This occurs primarily when we focus too exclusively on going back over the images and their representations revealing our guide who begins to impose them upon us to be the "eye of conscience," ever-sure of itself by reason of its omnipresence. However when the dreamer revisits the visible aspects of the dream several times over, he is often surprised to find that the eye's coherency becomes suspect, because it turns out its fixation is mired in the blindness of seeing things already seen, and the deafness of hearing only that which seems to have meaning.

By avoiding a discourse with this creature that fails to see that which is *not yet* seen, and cannot hear what is *not yet* heard, we become able to differentiate it from the dimension of the experience of the unconscious as such. What then becomes clear

¹¹ Lacan, "L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile a mourre," February 15, 1977.

¹² Lacan, Seminar XX.

¹³ Freud, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

is that only the latter experience leads to change, and that the eye of conscience is in fact devoted to working against it, which is why Lacan dubbed it an “anti-unconscious.”¹⁴ This paves the way for us to enter a scene which subverts the field of the eye of conscience (*conscience*) and perceptual reality, that is lodged in the interstice between perception and consciousness (*conscience*) as such.

The dream and the impulse of the drive

The dream cause¹⁵

Freud’s genius was to show that dream instigators, which he groups under the title “day’s residues,” have to do with “botched” encounters. “Botched” in the sense that a fragment of psychic reality was affected on the day prior to the dream by a meeting (between the subject and some other) which left some aspect of the former’s psychic reality “unfulfilled” (*en souffrance*). The dream is the dreamer’s attempt to construct a new encounter by making use of words to free himself from this lack of fulfillment.

This is not something that goes without saying. On the one hand the dream is our way of entering into a time that is differed, but on the other the staging of this scene always ends up rendering the encounter in a way that is different. “What encounter can there henceforth be with that forever inert being – even now being devoured by the flames – if not the encounter that occurs precisely when, by accident, as if by chance, the flames come to meet him?”¹⁶ This is the question raised by Lacan, who never forgot the drive impulse from which all encounters originate, a “*Trieb* to come.”¹⁷

Dream “navel” and originary Real

Although “everyone” was asleep, (one way of describing the field of tensionless representations created by the pleasure principle), suddenly a voice appeared that made itself heard and then dissipated, breaking the pre-established harmony. What appeared via this discursive rupturing, this dream “navel” as Freud put it in 1900, which the dream, the other scene, stages?

A new time and a new space which the activity of wakening conscious quickly seeks to cover over. Despite the atrocity of his vision, what we can be certain the dreamer was actually speaking about, without yet knowing it, was this new thing, this “navel” for his subjective constitution, an originary Real, because the gaze as object was blocking it from view due to its *not yet* having been constituted as a lost object.

Indeed, although we lack the associations that inevitably form part of the dream itself, we can easily imagine this father revisited the “botched” meeting he must have had with the still and terrible Real of the gaze which greeted him in the immobility of the eyes of his son’s corpse, or perhaps some words they exchanged about his fever before he died. The father may have believed he had managed to

¹⁴ Lacan, “L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile a mourre,” February 15, 1977.

¹⁵ TR: what is translated here as the “cause” of a dream has been translated in the S.E. as “dream-instigator.”

¹⁶ Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, (Seuil, p. 57), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Norton, 1981, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

forget this gaze encountered in the hostile exterior, but the gaze had clearly not forgotten him, despite how the careful pains he took for his son's body were able to screen them over for a short period.

What the dream's other scene dares to interpret is the possibility that the "misunderstanding" (*malentendu*) he had had with his son, the source of his feeling of "unheimlich," may be transmitted into a "good" one (*bien entendu*), a fear that is at the origin of the intimacy of "Heimlich," insofar as the persecutory gaze from the exterior has laid down its arms. The appearance of this fear (*crainte*), an effect of the Symbolic Father, is the creation that frees us from persecution. It bears witness to the existence of an outside that is separated, the locus and origin of an unthinkable encounter between father and son. How does the dream constitute a testimony to the existence of this originary elsewhere?

Drive reversal and "ex-timacy."

By revisiting his dream this father may have found a way to hear and receive the call of a constant force, the voice of the Symbolic Father,¹⁸ whose words are what are in fact resounding within the hole of its navel. What he may have heard there, the call of the invocatory drive,¹⁹ created a reversal in the scopical drive that transformed him from an **onlooker (*voyant*), reduced to being the object of the gaze, to a gazer himself (*regardant*), who authorizes himself from himself²⁰ by turning himself into a pure gaze as such.**

Let's revisit the specific moments in the mechanics of the drive. When he perceives the impulse of the signifying call of the invocatory drive, unique in its refusal to obey the limits laid down by meaning or signification, he both receives and discovers, (and this is what is so unthinkable about this encounter), that it is invoking a part of him that the eye cannot see although it is visible to the alterity-conveying gaze which greets him.

In fact, both drive impulses conveyed by alterity, scopical and invocatory, join hands in this moment – thereby transmitting the limitlessness of signifyingness which is at the origin of the impulsion towards the new. How does the father's dream render this new step forward?

The flames engulfing and blinding the onlooker, panic-stricken by the world of the visible, were replaced with the call of the Signifier of the Name-of-the-Father,²¹ a pure signifier, "**flame.**" This originary metaphor created by the dream itself was the source of a radiant signifyingness that lit up the fragment of the Real seeking recognition, which immediately became Symbolic. As a signifier cut off from all signification, the "flame" was thus raised to the status of meeting-place between the outermost exterior and the innermost and intimate interior, the "ex-timate" (Lacan). The author of this new meeting place was anonymous. It was, without a doubt, "ein neues Subjekt" (a new subject) in the Freudian sense of the term, which Lacan later

¹⁸ J. Chamoille, "*La voix du père symbolique*" ("The Voice of the Symbolic Father"), *Lettres de la S.P.F.*, no. 6 pp. 81-94.

¹⁹ This argument is intended as an echo of the way Alain Didier-Weill discusses the dialectic of this unique drive in *Les trois temps de la loi* (The Three Beats of the Law) and *Invocations*. Although Freud failed to name it specifically, Lacan referred to it as "the experience closest to the experience of the unconscious" on March 4, 1964.

²⁰ In the sense that he is no longer authorizing himself based on the Other, but on a hole (the navel) in his own knowledge.

²¹ Another way of accounting for the invocatory drive.

rendered in a new version: “it is novel to see a subject appear.”²²

Absolute Intimacy (*l'intime absolu*)

As soon as the subject begins to speak this secret dialectic knotting radical outside and intimate interior may be found. Could this be what an adolescent patient, speaking during her first consultation, unknowingly ran up against? After describing her symptoms of anorexia nervosa, she was surprised to then hear herself saying something about the way in which she was able to glimpse an otherwise unknown aspect of herself when she would play the flute – an aspect that, when she stopped, would quickly disappear. What surprised her the most about this was her realization that it was the musical notes, and those notes alone, which enabled her, in forever new and unheard of ways, to enjoy the use (*jouir*) of this absolute intimacy. Her own personal “Heimlich” that revealed itself only to her bidding, and not to the predatory and all-seeing gazes whose persecutory “Unheimlich” was disarmed by what “was being heard” in that moment. What she does not know she is demanding in her own absolute way is, in truth, the stakes involved in this intimacy of an unlimited moment that arises from the signifyingness she caught sight of therein.

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²² Lacan, op. cit., p. 162.