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Uncanny Conversions

I seem like someone who is an expert on the clinical entity ›conversion disorder‹, having published a book under this title; though, truth be told, I was taking the diagnosis less literally and looking broadly at the history of the term conversion, playing with it as a synonym for hysteria, and using it as a prop for discussing the body in psychoanalysis. So, of course, I was sent the most extreme case of the diagnosis I had ever seen or heard of, a woman who presented with two years of increasing symptoms such as bodily states of paralysis or strange feelings in her flesh, major disruptions to her state of consciousness from feelings of intense de-realization (almost a feeling of not being in the world) to moments of amnesia, hallucinatory impressions and sensations (many of which took the form of felt presences) – all of which, as I'm sure you can imagine, led her to feel that she was going mad.

After countless visits to the emergency room and neurological specialists and other medical specialists, no organic cause was revealed. At one point, she had to move back home, her mother sleeping with her in her childhood bed because she was in such a state of terror. She got in a fight with the psychiatrist she was urged to see over a question of medication and their session conversations, and angrily sought a referral from a friend, who suggested that she try to see me; said we would like each other. After seeing her the first time, I thought she should find the real expert on Conversion Disorder.

So the ›case‹ is a case that came from the book about conversion disorder that wasn't about conversion disorder, while the main features of her symptoms, surprisingly, constellated around the theme of the uncanny. One might imagine that any disruption in the state of consciousness, any hallucinatory experience or set

of strange bodily sensations, would have an uncanny quality. But this would be to make the mistake that Freud says we ought not to make regarding the specificity of the uncanny – in the same way that uncanny content doesn't work in any form of literature, certainly not in fairytales or science fiction.¹ So, a specific symptomatic condensation needs to take place in order to produce an uncanny effect, here, where the most material of symptoms – things that concretely happen on the level of the body and the realm of the sensory – are lined by the abstract qualities of uncanniness, an unease and uncertainty about a ghostly border of life, the body itself becoming a double and harbinger of death. Let's call these uncanny conversions.

The bodily symptoms then would be neither of the order of the *belle indifférence* of typical hysterical symptoms, nor have the aspects of preoccupation and concreteness of psychosomatic and hypochondriacal concerns. The other-worldliness would not take the intellectualized form of abstract obsessional thinking or hyper-rationalization, even when verging on omnipotent thought or modes of depersonalization, nor would the question of life and death be a conscious preoccupation, but rather something that returns from the outside, something that seems to happen *to* thought.

This quality of uncanny conversion seems to have an irremediable effect on the sense of reality, one's place in relation to it, especially with respect to what can be known or said, and how this reality is tied to the symbolic or to questions of representation. The uncanny is a psychosis that is somehow not psychosis, because the experience seems to have a representational quality to it, which makes it uncertain. I'll talk about how these qualities unfolded in this case; and then I want to end speaking briefly about a patient of Jacques Lacan that seems to have the exact reverse co-ordinates to this uncanny conversion disorder. I'd like to posit it as an uncanny ›cure‹, which involves, of all things, falling in love with reality.

In a perusal of the psychoanalytic literature I was curious about whether anyone had worked on the *uncanny* as a clinical phenomenon. The only thorough paper is from the infamous Austrian psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler from 1934. He writes:

In the sense of the uncanny we take alarm at our own omnipotence, which for a few seconds we imagine to exist ... The sense of the uncanny would thus represent a trance of a few seconds' duration, perhaps a brief state of mental alienation, and, from the standpoint of the ego, it is a *protective mechanism*. Dread of oneself (one's unconscious aggressive tendency) combined with dread of others (castration) result in what we might call an affective short-circuit ... [and] the mechanism serves the purposes of the super-ego at whose behest the feeble ego gives the danger-signal. Further, I would point out that the feeling of the uncanny may be secondarily *enjoyed as anxiety-pleasure [Angstlust]*, and masochistically induced over and over again (›sexualization of anxiety‹). This would at the same time serve as a gratification of the death-instinct *in dosi refracta*.²

Bergler feels that the uncanny is an overcoming of castration anxiety, an experience of a trace of infantile omnipotence that returns on the outside. It represents a sexualization of anxiety, a masochistic submission to one's own split off omnipotence. Bergler goes on to elucidate 13 ways we encounter this uncanny return of repressed omnipotence in patients.³ I'll summarize:

- (1) We may experience the sense of the uncanny when we watch another person giving play to his aggressive impulses, apparently untroubled by any feeling of guilt but unconsciously identified with his sadism.
- (2) A sense of the uncanny is experienced by obsessional neurotics when they feel they can ›work miracles‹ proving the omnipotence of their thoughts.
- 3) A sense of the uncanny may be experienced when other people fail to display some typical affective reaction which we should ›normally‹ expect to see in them, especially as a lack of fear betraying their omnipotent wishes.
- (4) A sense of the uncanny is experienced when we realize that we stand to another person or power in the relation of object and not, as we fondly imagined, of subject, especially of being lived by one's unconscious.