

»But how can a table—just a table——«:

Freud's *Uncanny* and the »séance of the table«

The question cited in the title of my essay: »But how can a table—just a table——,«¹ is taken from a story that would perhaps have been lost to oblivion if Freud did not mention it in his essay *The Uncanny*. The horror articulated by the first-person narrator in L. G. Moberly's story *Inexplicable* is apparently related to the fact that a table is not just a table. Even though Freud does not examine the uncanny potential of the table in his essay from 1919, it is specifically this potential that is instructive for Freud's notion of the unconscious as the *other scene* (*ein anderer Schauplatz*). Indeed, Moberly's story does not tire of staging a *surplus*, an *other* of the table, and does so by having the table itself act, enter the scene. The table asserts itself as an »actor,« or, better still, as a force with which a scene opens up. The moment that makes the table not »just a table« is in other words a scenic moment. The table is presented as a *table scene*, as – in the words of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* – »a séance of the table.«² In what follows, I will take a closer look at such »séances of the table« in order to see what can be obtained from them in connection with a scenic thinking of the uncanny.

Freud's mention of Moberly's story, which was published in *Strand Magazine* in 1917, could not be more parenthetical: it is found in an addendum at the end of the second section of *The Uncanny*.

In the middle of the isolation of war-time a number of the English *Strand Magazine* fell into my hands; and, among other somewhat redundant matter, 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; you stumble over something in the dark; you seem to see a vague form gliding over the stairs – in short, you 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 you felt its uncanny effect as something quite remarkable.³ ([...] man stolpert im Dunkeln über irgend etwas, man glaubt zu sehen, wie etwas undefinierbares über die Treppe huscht, kurz, man soll erraten, daß infolge der Anwesenheit dieses Tisches gespenstische Krokodile im Hause spuken, oder daß die hölzernen Scheusale im Dunkeln Leben bekommen oder etwas Ähnliches. Es war eine recht einfältige Geschichte, aber ihre unheimliche Wirkung verspürte man als ganz hervorragend.)⁴

What is initially noteworthy is what falls under the table in Freud's account: Freud does not mention the title, the author, or the exact date the story was published. As Robin Lydenberg and Nicholas Royle have shown, Freud's summary of the story is abridged and in part misleading.⁵ The young couple, for instance, explicitly does not move into a »furnished house,« but into an empty house in which the only piece of furniture is a table left behind by the previous tenants. Freud's brief description of the story focuses on what he calls the »uncanny effect« (»unheimliche Wirkung«) of the story, but without deriving this »uncanny effect« from the rhetorical and narrative structure of the story. What falls under the table in Freud's retelling is in other words the literary aspect of Moberly's *Inexplicable*, which – as I will show – has a decidedly scenic quality, a scenic quality that develops based on the table and thus generates the »uncanny effect« of the story.

The fact that the uncanny is a literary-scenic effect is shown by Moberly's story from the start. Here is the beginning of the story in the words of the first-person narrator:

The hinges were rusty, the gate swinging to behind me creaked dismally, and as the latch clicked into its socket with a sharp

clang I started. That clanging sound drew from the depth of my subconscious self some old stories of prison doors and turn-keys. (572)

The entrance to the story literally takes place in the story as an act of entering, very much in the register of the scenic: entering the property at 119 Glazebrook Terrace, a house in a suburb of London that is available for rent and that the female narrator is viewing for herself and her spouse. The description of the rusty hinges, the swinging of the gate, the clanging sound with which the latch falls into the socket makes a considerable contribution to the scenic quality of the beginning of the story. Another aspect of the scenic beginning of the story is that it has always already taken place: »I had just entered« (572). What opens up here is not a simple scene, but rather a double one: The clanging evokes »old stories of prison doors and turn-keys«; the beginning of the story is doubled in other uncanny stories.

Scenic moments pervade the entire story and are particularly inherent in what draws the attention of the narrator: a strikingly elaborate table in one of the bedrooms:

[...] my eye was attracted to a small table standing against the wall by the fireplace. It was octagonal in shape, set on three twisted legs – just a small occasional table such as one may see in any drawing-room [...]. And I turned the table more to the window to let the light fall upon it. The whole top was a crust of carved leaves and flowers, and in each curve of the octagon there was fashioned a small alligator, his head pointing outwards, his tail meeting the tails of the other crocodiles in the centre; and as the light fell full on the scaly bodies they had an extraordinary look of life, and the little sinister heads with the small evil eyes almost seemed to move. (573)

In specific lighting, the carvings on the table seem to come to life: the bodies of the alligators obtain an »extraordinary look of life«, »the heads [...] almost seem[ing] to move.« The fascinated contemplation of the table is connected with nothing less than a fundamental change of scene: as if the conditions of the room have