"Das Unheimliche"—the uncanny—has been with us for some time. Freud’s famous essay began to attract critical attention in the early seventies as psychoanalysis became important in literary studies. Samuel Weber’s essay, “The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment,” first published in MLN in 1973 and reprinted in the expanded edition of The Legend of Freud in 2000, is now a classic in the literature of the uncanny. Reading Freud’s essay “Das Unheimliche” along with Hoffmann’s “Sandman” and Villier de l’Isle-Adam’s novel l’Eve future, Weber makes an important intervention in arguing against the many prior approaches to this topic which had tended to understand it solely as an “emotive phenomenon” identified with feelings of fear, anxiety, weirdness, etc. “Such a position,” he writes, “misconstrues the peculiar structure of the uncanny, or more precisely, ignores the fact that the uncanny has a particular structure, which, however intimately bound up with subjective feelings—above all anxiety—is nonetheless determined by a series of ‘objective’ factors that in turn stand in a certain relation to literary discourse” (208). He thus joins in the discussion that begins to understand Freud’s text as itself a case of the uncanny, and indeed of the literary uncanny. Weber points to Freud’s failure to define the uncanny in a final or complete way, suggesting that this is not an error on Freud’s part, but rather tells us something about the uncanny itself. At the same time, Weber steers clear of defining the uncanny as an “object.” Rather, what characterizes the uncanny is precisely the impossibility of looking it “straight in the eyes, as it were . . . peeling and paring.
away its external layers to get at the ‘conceptual kernel’ within and yet unable to ever eliminate the (growing) shadow of doubt—all this indicates that even if the uncanny is not conceived as an irreducibly subjective sentiment, its objective structure cannot be determined solely in thematic terms” (1115). The uncanny calls not for a definition, a collection of thematic terms, but rather, as a “‘formal,’ textual structure,” demands reading. This insistence on reading, foregrounding the textuality of the uncanny, points to the ways in which the uncanny functions as a critique of identity. “The reading that I now propose to undertake,” Weber writes, “seeks . . . to avoid the impasse of interpretations which—like Freud’s Musterung—conceive and organize their own activity, consciously or unconsciously, in terms derived from a notion of perception (‘vision’) which in turn is based upon ontological presuppositions that the problematic of castration precisely and decisively dislocates: namely, upon the presence and identity of the ‘object’ in question” (1115).

Since Weber’s article was published, as well as several other lively texts on the topic, “the Uncanny” has tended to become a fixed psychoanalytic concept whose descriptive potential overshadows the fact that the uncanny puts in question the possibility of definition itself. Weber’s work on the uncanny, in contrast, focuses on reading and textuality, rather than on conceptual results. His reading of the uncanny continues in the essay “Uncanny Thinking” (1999), also added to the new edition of Legend of Freud. Interestingly, the two essays on the uncanny are both supplements to the original book and thus destabilize the identity boundaries of The Legend of Freud. In this essay, I would like to follow Weber’s lead in continuing to read the uncanny and outline some of its peculiar textual features.

Weber’s discussion in the earlier essay, while giving due importance to the problem of castration in the uncanny, reads this in the Lacanian tradition as a problem of the unreliability of vision, the strange crossing from sense perception to the symbolic order, and the emergence of anxiety around the creeping conviction of the subject’s incompletion, lack of wholeness and fallibility. That is, he does not reduce it to the castration scenario, as Freud does in his (mis)reading of the “The Sandman”:

For what the child “discovers”—that is, interprets—as “castration” is neither nothing nor simply something, at least in the sense in which the child expects and desires it to be: what is “discovered” is the absence of the maternal phallus, a kind of negative perception, whose object or referent—perceptum—is ultimately nothing but a difference, although no
simple one, since it does not refer to anything, least of all to itself, but
instead refers itself indefinitely . . . . Castration thus structures the future
identity and experience of the subject, by confronting it with its uncon-
scious desire as a violent and yet constitutive difference, preventing the
subject from ever being fully present to itself, or fully self-conscious. (215–
16)

This castration anxiety, then, is not literally about the boy’s fear of
losing his penis, but surrounds what Weber describes as a “restruc-
turing of experience, including the relation of perception, desire and
consciousness, in which the narcissistic categories of identity and
presence are riven by a difference they can no longer subdue or
command” (216–17). The differences between presence and ab-
sence, sameness and difference, self and other, are of course particu-
larly at stake here. All of these pairs are troubled by the destabiliza-
tion of binary opposition that Freud formulates as one of the
fundamental features of the uncanny, that is, between the “heimlich”
and the “unheimlich,” the “homey” and the “foreign,” the familiar
and the strange. While the uncanny is often discussed in terms of
these pairs, most importantly, the opposition itself is untenable.
Freud points out: “Aus diesem langen Zitat ist für uns am interes-
santesten, dass das Wörtchen heimlich unter den mehrfachen
Nuancen seiner Bedeutung auch eine zeigt, in der es mit seinem
Gegensatz unheimlich zusammenfällt” [“What interests us most in
this long extract is to find that among its different shades of meaning
the word ‘heimlich’ exhibits one which is identical with its opposite,
‘unheimlich’”].6 One might even read “unheimlich” here as an
adverb, for the coincidence of a term with its opposite is itself
uncanny. Uncanny is the word always falling away from itself into its
opposite, yet affirming itself in doing so. The uncanny comes into
being as a violation of the law of non-contradiction. Like a ghost, it
“is” and “is not.” The opposition between subject and object also falls
away with the erosion of the structure of identity; subject and
predicate can no longer keep their boundaries intact. The uncanny is
not a stable concept (subject) to which the predicate of a clear
definition can be attached. Likewise, there can be no reliable
identification of a text or event as uncanny, no stable thing to which
the qualities of the uncanny can be predicated. The propositional
structure of adequation collapses in uncanny writing, for the model
of adequation requires that each member stay on its own side of the
copula. However, this does not mean that the uncanny is some
ineffable quality about which nothing can be said. In fact, the naming
of the uncanny is constitutive of it, helps to bring it about, and partakes in it; this relationship is one that can be further examined. Speaking of the uncanny thus calls for some caution, or perhaps, it makes explicit the caution required when trying to define anything at all. Martin Heidegger discusses the pitfalls of definition in his essay “Zur Seinsfrage,” “On the Question of Being,” which will incidentally entail some mention of the uncanny. In this essay, Heidegger takes issue with Ernst Jünger’s efforts to find a “good definition” of nihilism. Heidegger clearly criticizes the definitional procedure that takes the object of inquiry to be a stable and separate entity waiting to be defined by propositions. Instead, he allows questions to “turn towards” what they ask about, hoping thus to dislodge the oppositional relationship separating and dessicating both the subject and object poles. This is how he asks about the essence, the Wesen, of a thing:


[From where does this essence come? Where must we seek it? What is the locale of the nothing? We shall not be asking too much in an unthinking manner if we search for the locale and in our discussion locate the essence of the line. Yet is this something other than the attempt to provide what you demand: ‘a good definition of nihilism’? It looks as though thinking is continually led around or even chased around the Same as though in a magical circle, yet without ever being able to approach this Same. But perhaps the circle is a concealed spiral. Perhaps this spiral has in the meantime become more constricted. This means: the manner and way in which we are approaching the essence of nihilism are being transformed. Whatever is good in the ‘good definition’ that you rightfully demand will prove its worth in our giving up the desire to define, to the extent that this desire must become fixed in propositional statements in which thinking dies out.8]
The occurrence of the “magical circle” recalls the “circle of fire” Nathaniel repeatedly invokes in Hoffmann’s “Sandmann” as he goes mad. Weber recalls this phrase in his analysis of “Uncanny Thinking.” Paraphrasing Heidegger, Weber describes how:

In leaving what he knows for the unknown, man seeks to impose his order on all areas of life. But although he succeeds in developing great skill in organizing and opening realms of being, he finds himself thrown back again and again onto the paths he has already traversed. In short, like Nathaniel in “The Sandman,” man here is caught in a circle. In it, “he turns around and about in his own circle” (Heidegger 121/157), caught in the rut of the all too familiar and however agile and ingenious he may be in discovering all sorts of paths, there is no way out. (26)

Finally, Weber argues that for Heidegger, the uncanny happening or event disrupts this circle, breaks it apart, and creates the possibility of an openness towards something other, something strange and alien. Just as in the passage directed towards Jünger and nihilism, Heidegger expands the magical circle of his questioning into a spiral that might change the path of thinking. Weber’s reading of Heidegger in this essay focuses on the uncanny as the possibility of an opening, of change, of repetition with a difference.

What kind of difference does uncanny thinking make? If we return to “Zur Seinsfrage,” the difference destroys the technological relationship between a dominating subjective force and its “Bestand,” what stands at its disposal, by establishing instead an inclination, a turning towards, that is a genuine relation. The turning towards would actually partake in Being (Sein) which could no longer be understood as an object separate from the process of turning towards. To indicate this new status of Sein, Heidegger recommends that it be written crossed out. “Die kreuzweise Durchstreichung,” he explains, “wehrt zunächst nur ab, nähmlich die fast unausrottbare Gewöhnung, ‘das Sein’ wie ein für sich stehendes und dann auf den Menschen erst bisweilen zu kommendes Gegenüber vorzustellen” (405) [“The crossing out of this word initially has only a preventative role, namely, that of preventing the almost ineradicable habit of representing ‘being’ as something standing somewhere on its own that then on occasion first comes face-to-face with human beings” (310)]. This revision of the materiality of writing reshapes what it names and, at least if Heidegger is right, presents a relation between human inquiry and Being which is not that of subject and object.

Because this relation no longer obtains, one cannot properly say
that Being “is” as one would say of an object. In fact, *Sein* presents itself precisely as the *Sein des Seienden*, that is, the being of that which is and thus is not itself something that “is” or appears. Since Being “is” not, or is that “was ganz und gar kein Seinendes ist,” it can present itself “im Gesichtskreis des wissenschaftlichen Vorstellens . . . nur als Nichts . . . [darbieten]” (412) [. . . within the perspective of scientific representation . . . that which is not in any way a being (namely, being) can present itself only as nothing” (316)]. Coinciding at the point which is not, *Sein* and *Nichts* become interchangeable. Opposition no longer holds. Importantly, this “nothing” is not itself nothing, but also cannot be said to be anything: “Dieses Nichts, das nicht das Seiende ist und das es gleichwohl gibt, ist nichts Nichtiges. Es gehört zum An-wesen. Sein und Nichts gibt es nicht nebeneinander. Eines verwendet sich für das Andere in einer Verwandtschaft, deren Wesensfülle wir noch kaum bedacht haben” (413) [“This nothing, which is not beings and which is nevertheless given, is nothing negative. It belongs to presencing. Being and nothing are not given alongside one another. The one employs itself for the other in a kinship whose essential fullness we have as yet scarcely pondered” (317)].

The relation Heidegger establishes here between *Sein* and *Nichts* thus resembles the coexistence of the “heimlich” and the “unheimlich” in Freud’s essay. Heidegger’s “es gibt” points to the way in which this point of confusion and coexistence of opposites can be named without a proper subject position; neither Being nor nothing can properly bear the copula “is.” We might say the same thing about the uncanny which has no essential core, but certainly does come to us in a variety of literary and theoretical texts. Heidegger himself invokes the uncanny in “Zur Seinsfrage” to describe the operation of the term *Sein*: “Als die unbedingte Versammlung solchen Stellens schwindet das *Sein* nicht hin. Es bricht in einer einzigen Unheimlichkeit auf” (408) [“As the unconditioned gathering of such setting in place, *being* does not disappear. It irrupts in a singular uncanniness” (313)]. The turning and shifting of *Sein* and *Nichts* is indicated where the ability of *Sein* to signify is interrupted by its own motion, by its own signifying, and is prevented from becoming a concept or stable signified. The graphics of the crossing out interrupts meaning, in a peculiar uncanniness, which also allows “Sein” to irrupt, to open up, or to get underway. The uncanny i(nt)e)rrupts.

In addressing Jünger, Heidegger joins his examination of nihilism in considering the current state of things. He agrees that a proper
understanding of nihilism is still wanting. Citing Nietzsche, Heidegger describes this misunderstood or forgotten nihilism as an uncanny guest:

Der Mangel träbt das Urteil über den Blick bei der Beurteilung unserer Lage. Er macht das Urteil über den Nihilismus leichtfertig und das Auge blind für das Gegenwart ‘dieses unheimlichsten aller Gäste’ (Nietzsche). Er heißt das ‘unheimlichste,’ weil er als der unbedingte Wille zum Willen die Heimatlosigkeit als solche will. Darum hilft es nichts, ihm die Tür zu weisen, weil er überall schon längst und unsichtbar in Haus umgeht. Es gilt, diesen Gast zu erblicken und zu durchschauen. (381)

[This lack dims our view in assessing our situation. It makes a judgment concerning nihilism ready and easy and blinds us to the presence of “this most uncanny of all guests” (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*; Outline. *Werke*, vol. XV, p. 141). It is called the “most uncanny” because, as the unconditional will to will, it wills homelessness as such. This is why it is of no avail to show it the door, because it has long since been roaming around invisibly inside the house. The task is to catch sight of and see through this guest. (292)]

The uncanny guest, a figure for nihilism, understands Nichts to mean simply nothing rather than the peculiar something/nothing of the pair Sein and Nichts and thus supposes that there is no ground or transcendent opening to being—that there is only Seiendes, appearance and no essence, nothing behind it. The will to homelessness means just this: the emphatic belief that there is nothing but the ontic, no opening, no other than ourselves.

The first appearance of the uncanny in “Zur Seinsfrage,” then, comes in the figure of a guest, a figure both familiar, as one invited or welcomed in, and an alien invader. We might translate Heidegger’s “es gibt,” in this case, as “it walks.” The uncanny walks around the house invisibly, before being known or recognized. It walks to announce itself before being present; its walking interrupts our understanding to show its temporal and spatial distention, the absorption of a content or concept in the narrative spasms that allow the uncanny to come forth, over time, never whole. To reiterate, the uncanny cannot be properly understood, since it signifies the disruption of the proper and the instability of understanding. Weber reminds us:

Nevertheless, the shunting aside of the uncanny by most ‘scholarly’ discourse and research doesn’t succeed in putting it to rest. Rather, like the Sandman, the uncanny crops up again and again, with surprising resilience, where it is least expected: as a figure of speech, an atmosphere of a story, an allegorical instance. Announced by the sound of approaching
steps, of heavy breathing, wheezing or coughing, or other semi-articulate sounds, uncanny figures and situations return to remind us of the difficulty of distinguishing clearly between language and reality, between feelings and situations, between what we know and what we ignore. Defiguring of the figure, the Sandman [The uncanny guest - sb] marks the spot where what is (there) and what is not, presence and absence, coming and going, can no longer be clearly distinguished. (19–20)

Weber’s passage and the spasmodic appearances of the uncanny in Heidegger’s essay point to its syncopated structure which makes it impossible to define the uncanny. We find the same problem in the oft-cited lines from Schelling:

Der reine Himmel, . . . nachdem die dunkle and verdunkelnde Gewalt jenes unheimlichen Princips (unheimlich nennt man alles, was im Geheimniss, in Verborgenen, in der Latenz bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist)—jener Aether . . . konnte erst sich ausspannen, nachdem de Gewalt jenes unheimlichen Princips, das in den früheren Religionen herrschte, in dem Mysterium niedergeschlagen war . . . .

[The pure heaven . . . after the dark and darkening violence of that uncanny principle (we can uncanny everything which should have remained secreted, in the concealed, in latency, but has come forth)—that aether could only spread itself out after the violence of that principle which had ruled in earlier religions was struck down into the mystery.]

The quality of “unheimlich” results from the movement of the ground or principle; that is, the principle is not itself uncanny until it has violated its own nature by stepping forth into actuality, into the ontic. The uncanny principle, then, really describes a dynamic structure of coming forth unbidden and being covered over again. What remains is a “Mystery,” a word like “Sein” that creates a void behind it, a negative ground.10 If the Mystery is like a scab, it points both to Seinsvergessenheit—the empty signifier, the forgetting of being—and to Verborgenheit, concealedness—the condition of not-being-revealed that allows for something to creep into view.11 For Schelling, the world of Greek mythology is constructed precisely on this kind of an ambiguous ground or unground: “Die homerische Gotterwelt schließt schweigend ein Mysterium in sich, und ist über einem Mysterium, über einem Abgrund gleichsam errichtet, den sie wie mit Blumen zudeckt” (649) [The world of the Homeric gods encloses a mystery silently within itself and is erected over a mystery, over an abyss, which it covers over as if with flowers]. The uncanny opens as the flowers strewn over the abyss, the covering over its own hollow.
The flowers of Greece repress the abyss below them; the uncanny guest, in contrast, reminds us of the absence he presents.

The walking of the uncanny guests leads us into the textuality of the uncanny. For it spreads itself out, suggests approach or arrival, yet only to draw back the suggestion of meaning that comes forth in its perambulations. Freud’s famous wanderings through the red light district of a small Italian village partake in this ambulatory uncanny. The anecdote serves as an example of the uncanny brought about by the repetition of the same that invokes an uncanny feeling, Freud says, when accompanied by “certain circumstances.” Freud finds himself in a neighborhood, “über deren Charakter ich nicht lange in Zweifel bleiben konnte” (249) [“of whose character I could not long remain in doubt” (237)]. Hurrying away, presumably from the token of his own lust, Freud finds himself in the same street again, now beginning to attract attention. Interestingly, Freud does not actually mention any repressed or emerging desires; but the attention he draws suggests that his body, helpless and “führerlos,” is becoming a meaningful sign for others. Upon his unlikely third return to the same street, we begin to believe that his repressed desire has come forth. Yet what he says is: “Dann erfaßte mich ein Gefühl, das ich nur als unheimlich bezeichnen kann . . .” (249) [“Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny” (237)]. The naming of the uncanny here recognizes that the seemingly meaningless motion of the body, in coinciding with itself in the street of painted women, turns into a meaningful sign. That it, what ought to have remained hidden has come forth. The uncanny, though, remains attached to the repeated movement; its explanation by way of repressed desire does not do away with the uncanny effect brought about through walking.

The working of the uncanny obscures the effort to understand it and thus refers us back to a non-understanding that is its real sense. Of the uncanny it might be said, as of “a certain German book” in Poe’s “Man of the Crowd, “er [sic] lässt sich nicht lesen,”13 “it does not suffer itself to be read.” This story shares in the uncanny of repetition of the same. As the ambulatory uncanny, it privileges the walking body, the signifying process, over any interior or meaning which might characterize it as a whole or replace it as its end. In walking, the excesses of time and space, of the materiality of writing, of the process of signification, have priority over any signified sense, any subjective interior, any invisible cause or ground.14 The convalescent narrator, I recall, is seated in a London coffee-house. “With a cigar in my mouth
and a newspaper in my lap, I had been amusing myself for the greater part of the afternoon, now in poring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street” (475). He amuses himself by establishing abstract generalizations within which he subsumes the characters who pass by. The categories are “obvious” (clerks); “The division of the upper clerks . . . it was not possible to mistake” . . . “There were many individuals of dashing appearance, whom I easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pickpockets . . .” “The gamblers . . . were still more easily recognizable . . .” The moving bodies are read and replaced with a stable conceptual content that states their essence or meaning. “. . . although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window presented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years” (478). The diachrony of life is revealed in a synchronous image as its content, process replaced by result. This cognitive procedure is interrupted by the appearance of a particular figure whose nature cannot be revealed. The narrator takes a turn towards him: “I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated” (all qualities, by the way, which might be associated with the uncanny). “‘How wild a history,’ I said to myself, ‘is written within that bosom!’ Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him.” As his desire overcomes him, the cool analytic position is abandoned. “Hurriedly putting on an overcoat, and seizing my hat and cane, I made my way into the street . . . . With some little difficulty I at length came within sight of him, approached, and followed him closely, yet cautiously, so as not to attract his attention” (479). With these sudden, jerky and compulsive bodily movements, the reader is dislocated and leaves his seat in the coffee-house to follow his man. He has entered into the circulation of signifiers and thus has actually already fallen into the uncanny, for the track he lays out in pursuit becomes the first in a repeated series.

The narrator suggests that the meaning of the man will be revealed if he is pursued, that his walking will reveal a meaning as his destination. Yet the more adamant the search, the less plausible the signs become. The reader of the text also follows closely, expecting each detail to be a clue. “Here a change in his demeanor followed.” We wait to hear what, in fact, is going on. “He walked more and more slowly and with less object than before—more hesitatingly.” Are we
approaching the goal? “He crossed and re-crossed the way repeatedly, without apparent aim”—but surely the aim will soon be made clear? But repetition begins to disappoint us; its condensing points appear, yet lead nowhere. “A second turn brought us into a square, brilliantly lighted and overflowing with life. The old manner of the stranger reappeared. . . . I was surprised, however, to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square, that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times” (479). Even as he becomes familiar, his strangeness increases: “A few minutes brought us to a large and busy bazaar, with the localities of which the stranger appeared well acquainted, and where his original demeanor again became apparent, as he forced his way to and fro . . . His head again fell on his breast; he appeared as I had seen him at first . . . As he proceeded . . . his old uneasiness and vacillation were resumed” (480). As in Heidegger’s phrase, it is useless to try to show him the door. In or out, this man doesn’t settle. Inside the Gin bar nothing is different: “With a half shriek of joy the old man forced a passage within, resumed at once his original bearing, and stalked backward and forward, without apparent object, among the throng.”

As the story draws to a close, the circumambulations of the city continue in an unending cycle, revealing nothing. “Yet he did not hesitate in his career; but, with a mad energy, retrace his steps at once, to the heart of the mighty London . . . . But as usual, he walked to and fro, and during the day did not pass from out the turmoil of that street” (481).

The ambulatory uncanny remains impervious to efforts to stop it, to gather it, to decipher it. The narrator concludes: “This old man is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds . . . and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that ‘er lässt sich nicht lesen’” (481). The old man is deeply improper; he never goes home, he never turns in, he never reveals an interior. But in fact he does reveal the lack of an interior, the presence of an absence, the fact of illegibility. This figure breaks off in a “singular uncanniness,” pursuing its wild circle of fire interrupted by the repetition of the words: “Er lässt sich nicht lesen.” This quality of the German book of the first paragraph is now transferred to the text in which it finds itself: “The Man of the Crowd.” (The book is indicated by the pronoun “er,” a masculine third-person that could easily refer to “man,” rather than by the neuter “es” which would replace the German word “Buch.”) In failing
to read, we read; in reading, we fail to read. The process of reading overshadows its interpretive result—a lack of insight or understanding.

This result, which is none, displays the strange cohabitation of opposites of the uncanny, the violation of the law of non-contradiction. It also plays with the distinction between diachrony and synchrony, or the experience of the uncanny over time (walking, reading) and the conclusion or characterization we attribute to it after the process has ended (understanding). While the text does stop, we might say it doesn’t really quite “end.” It functions as the uncanny happening Weber outlines in “Uncanny Thinking.” The uncanny happening, as for Heidegger, disrupts the narrative of the empirical in the relation to death. “It should be noted,” Weber writes, that when it comes time to formulate just why and how the uncanny is ‘nothing special,’ . . . and that it has nothing to do with dying considered as an actual event, Heidegger resorts to the present participle of the verb “to happen” (geschehender) in order to designate the temporality that distinguishes the uncanny as happening from death as an empirical event. This is of particular interest given his preceding remarks on the circularity of the paths that mark one’s history and on their tendency to revolve around themselves. “Circle of fire . . . .” The circle of familiarity, of the home, tends to turn into the less virtuous solipsism, tautology, and even death, from which one can easily yearn to escape, to break out in search of adventure and the unknown. But such yearning supposes that one can find the beginning of the beginning, the circumference of the circle of the familiar and the family. Otherwise, how can one hope to escape? (26)

Focusing on the present participle as marker of a “temporality of disjunction,” Weber argues that, for Heidegger, the uncanny opens a “breach” in this circularity in breaking with one narrative level—the empirical—and opening another. The point of disruption would at least suggest a point of possibility: “In being thus overwhelmed as breach, human being is forced to open itself to alteration, transformation, deformation. For is only in this forced and violent opening, which can also entail violence and even disintegration, that there is space for something else to happen.” In Poe’s text, this breach or disruption is glimpsed in the scission of self-citation, in the subsumption of “The Man of the Crowd” under the man of the crowd, or the vertiginous experience of reading the unreadable, a de facto experience that has no logical meaning. The narrator’s conclusion renders the repetitive motions something “other than simply the return of the same” (28), yet also does not erase them. The phrase “es lässt sich nicht lesen” functions like Heidegger’s crossing out of Sein.
Over this phrase, or the crossing out, reading stumbles. This stumbling is itself the experience of the uncanny. In his well known text on *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov’s main purpose can be understood to be the stabilization of the distinction of discursive levels that will keep the critic’s position outside of the uncanny. Todorov allies the critical position with the synchronic view of the text. As his subtitle indicates, “A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,” the critic is interested in general rules, not in the idiosyncrasies of singular experiences. He writes: “‘The Fantastic’ is a name given to a kind of literature, to a literary genre. When we examine works of literature from the perspective of genre, we engage in a very particular enterprise: we discover a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is specific about each of them.”

This literary theorist’s knowledge is oriented towards a general principle, an intellectual construct that can subsume many cases within it. He thus establishes a hierarchy, in which a stable general principle, an object of knowledge, stands above the many and variable particular cases, the empirical texts, that the concept includes.

In rising above the variability of singular cases to a general principle, Todorov also shifts attention away from emotional responses of a particular reader to the safer stance of intellectual certainty. He rejects the emotional response as unscientific: “We are told,” Todorov writes,

that it is pointless to speak of genres . . . for the work of art is essentially unique, valuable because of what is original about it that distinguishes it from all other works, and not because of whatever in it may resemble them . . . This response implies a romantic attitude with regard to the material under observation. Such a position is not, strictly speaking, false; it is simply extraneous. We may certainly like a work for one reason or another; this is not what defines it as an object of study. (5)

This passage displays the duality of the subject of enunciation: the voice of Todorov, the unmarked voice of the theorist who enunciates general principles; and that of an “I” or a “we,” an embodied subject sitting around reading who has this or that response to the book he or she is holding in his/her hands. Todorov presents his theoretical conclusions about the fantastic, the uncanny and the marvelous, from the higher perspective of the scientist who has purified and rejected whatever may have come from the realm of the unchartable senses of taste, emotion, particularly, etc. Thus two hierarchies are in place: that privileging the concept of the genre over the particular case; and
the pure and objective theoretical voice over the bodily bound reader, occupied with a material text in time and space: that is, reading.

Todorov defines the fantastic as the realm of ambiguity between reality and dream, truth and illusion. The fantastic emerges at the conjunction between two narrative levels framed by differing assumptions about what is real. “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).

Todorov goes on to specify:

The fantastic, we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation. At the story’s end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belong to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (41)

The process of reading remains imbricated in the ambiguities and uncertainties of a particular subject position. The theorist, in contrast, decides about undecidability and establishes certainty about uncertainty, thus mastering the confusion between reality and illusion characterizing the process of reading. The decision placing a text safely within the bounds of a genre comes “after” we have finished reading, after we have torn our eyes away from the marks on the page, sit back and reflect, and consider the text as a whole.

While Todorov attempts to hold these two levels apart in a stable hierarchy, the uncanny inevitably brings about their collapse. Todorov describes the process as follows: “There is an uncanny phenomenon [my emphasis—“il y a un phénomène étrange”] which we can explain in two fashions, by types of natural causes and supernatural causes. The possibility of a hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect.”16 If the terms uncanny, fantastic, and marvelous can only apply to the work as a whole, after the completion of reading, then how can one account for this “uncanny phenomenon” experienced “while” reading? The theoretical voice is itself syncopated and cannot name its own experience without passing through a narrative time loop. The uncanny is already there before it arrives; and Todorov’s
definite classifications can only post-date an example or case of the uncanny that must occur before the uncanny can be defined. The particular uncanny phenomenon thus pre-dates and conditions the possibility of discovering a principle or rule of the uncanny, much as Todorov will then try to establish the independence of the rules he sets up. What takes place here is a certain overturning of a logical hierarchy. Generational difference collapses: the son precedes the father, and the theorist unwittingly falls back into the position of an ordinary reader, who must read without yet knowing what he reads, whom the text prepares for the effects to come.

The covert preparation for the uncanny is of course the preamble of the uncanny itself. The repetition producing uncanny effects has been carefully laid in to the text in ways which a first reading cannot possibly identify. The uncanny does not repeat a certain X; rather, it emerges in the recognition of repetition, through the connection of disparate and distant moments stretched over the temporal and spatial expanse of the text. When we notice repetition, the uncanny will have occurred; it can have no beginning, for we can never see the first element of a repetitive structure until it has already been repeated. In dealing with the uncanny, we will always remain subject to the passive and ignorant position of the first instance which we can never grasp directly. In the recognition of an uncanny effect, at best, we can become aware of the way we have been manipulated by the text, how it leaves its mark on us before we can notice it; and perhaps our reading, too, is programmed and controlled in ways we cannot master. In our “first reading,” where the uncanny will have had its effect before we have been able to conceptualize it, we must momentarily have forgotten ourselves.

If critic and reader cannot be definitively divided and held separate in a stable manner, we lose Todorov’s certainty about uncertainty, and are ourselves dragged into the confusion between reality and illusion that is in question. The experience of dislocation, loss of control, the sense of the origin of the “I” in an other or elsewhere, the experience of self-forgetfulness: these lapses of consciousness are frequently thematized in uncanny texts. Hoffmann describes the resulting anxiety in a passage referring to the uncanniness of an incident of magnetic hypnosis:

“Vielleicht deutet gerade das auf die Macht fremder psychischer Einflüsse, denen wir uns willkürlich hingeben müssen. So wie die Somnambule sich durchaus nicht ihres somnamulenen Zustandes erinnern und dessen, was sich in demselben mit ihr begeben, so kann vielleicht jene grauenhafte...
Angst, deren Ursache uns verborgen bleibt, der Nachhall irgendeines gewaltigen Zaubers sein, der uns uns selbst entrückt.” (3: 801–2)

[“Perhaps this indicates precisely the power of strange and alien psychic influences to which we are compelled to surrender ourselves. Just as the somnambulist can not remember her somnambulic at all and what happened to her during it—perhaps in the same way, that horrifying anxiety whose cause remains obscure may perhaps be the distant echo of some violent magical force which has entranced us and torn us away from ourselves.”]

This horrible anxiety, a certain loss and non-presence of self, is associated with a passive and feminine, a displaced, non-original or ab-original position. It also invokes a kind of pleasure, which is perhaps why we enjoy uncanny stories, intermingled with anxiety. This anxiety is meant to ward off the seduction of the position described: one which is “improper” and inappropriate. The thinker does not want to be a sleep-walking reader controlled by the alien powers of another, the text and author before us, in our hands. It is not surprising that Goethe, the “father” of German literature, writing of Hoffmann, would speak of “sick aberrations, the spasmodic utterances of a being tortured nearly to death,” against which he issues the following command: “We must renounce and tear ourselves away from these ravings if we do not want to become mad ourselves.”

Goethe’s remark betrays the fear of mimetic contamination: the fear that “I,” this subject, am nothing but a copy of one that came before me, that my reading and thinking are compelled to repeat something before, and beyond, me and my control. The fear that I am a double, a copy, an imitation, and not a self-originating essence.

In Hoffmann’s writing, the uncanny accumulates around the narrative contact between self and other, presence and absence. The magnetic scene, as suggested above, frequently thematizes the spectacle of the self dislocated from itself. Hoffmann is inventive in describing this self-dislocation (entrückt). The uncanny is distinguished from other types of horror precisely as the experience of something unrecognizable. Hoffmann writes:

“Ich kann es mir denken, dass ich den plötzlichen Schreck irgendeiner grauenhafte Erscheinung wohl ertragen könnte, das unheimliche, den äußern Sinn in Anspruch nehmende Treiben eines unsichtbaren Wesens, würde mich dagegen unfehlbar wahnsinnig machen. Es ist das Gefühl der gänzlichen hilflosen Ohnmacht, das den Geist zermalmen müßte.”

(“Die Automate,” 2:432)
I imagine I could certainly endure the sudden fright caused by some horrible apparition; but the uncanny workings of an invisible being affecting me would surely drive me mad. It is the feeling of the most utterly helpless impotence and unconsciousness which must certainly crush the spirit." ("Die Automate," 2:432)

The uncanny characterizes the vision of the invisible, the autonomous “effect” whose ground is simultaneously asserted and withdrawn. The “unsichtbares Wesen,” like the Being of beings, does not appear, “is” not; yet it is also fundamentally related to, linked to, in action in, what it makes possible. Insofar as it is named here, one cannot simply say that it “is not” at all. What Hoffmann describes as helpless unconsciousness is, perhaps, the turning towards another kind of thinking that is not or based on opposition and conceptual hierarchies. It is the experience of the un-consciousness, the mind which is no mind. Importantly, this remains an event, an experience, of limitation itself. It is not a “consciousness” of anything nor the appearance of a delimitable “unconscious.” The uncanny destroys the hierarchy of essence and appearance and the logic of adequation and manifestation it supports.

The opening to the tale “der Unheimliche Gast” is filled with several anecdotes describing the horror and uncanniness that surround phenomena with hidden causes. From the title of the story, we would expect that the personage it names would reveal something essential about the uncanny. Yet he does so only in the way of the uncanny—indirectly, “entrückt.” The story is lodged within Hoffmann’s collection, Die Serapionsbrüder, which follows the literary meetings of four friends: Ottmar, Cyprian, Theodor and Lothar. These characters meet to read their compositions out loud and comment on them. Many of the stories were composed earlier or separately; critics have often dismissed the frame of the Serapion Society as a mere conventional device that does not contribute anything to the texts. Ottmar presents the text, “der Unheimliche Gast,” composed, he says, “in Cyprians Manier.” The plot is rather complicated. The story opens on a stormy night in the parlor of the Colonel’s home. His wife, his daughter Angelika, and her French companion Marguerite are receiving for tea the two friends, Dagobert and Moritz. Inspired by the frightful weather and the coziness (heimlichkeit) of the domestic shelter, the friends pass the time telling horror stories, each one increasing the general uncanny feeling thus provoked. Despite the Colonel’s wife’s objections to these tales, they nevertheless continue as if in an inevitable chain. This chain is abruptly interrupted by the
unexpected entrance of Count S—I, the uncanny guest. He seems to have been invited, but no one recognizes him. When the colonel arrives home, he acknowledges him as a dear friend, to whom he owes everything: honor, money and even his life (the reason for this debt is never clarified).

Dagobert and Angelika are secretly in love. The Count, however, has come to ask for her hand, for he became enamored of a portrait of her that the Colonel had shown him. But the suit of the Count, the same age as the Colonel, is rejected by the daughter Angelika, and her bond with Dagobert is settled. In the meantime, war breaks out again. When Dagobert and the Colonel are called into battle, the Colonel’s family is left in the care of the foreign Count, for whom they begin to develop an increasing affection. After the news arrives of Dagobert’s death, the Count gains an unexpected control over Angelika, who agrees to marry him despite her mother’s suspicious misgivings. At the moment of the wedding, Dagobert reappears; Angelika falls into a magnetic stupor; and the Count is struck dead. It turns out that the Count is a magnetizer and has used his occult powers to devise Dagobert’s disappearance, falsely reported as death, and Angelika’s submission. Yet the powers of good prevail and the spell is broken. The story ends with a repeat of the hearth-scene in Dagobert and Angelika’s home; they recall with bemusement the wretched night of the uncanny guest’s arrival and the temporary disaster’s caused by him—disasters now resolved in the reconstitution of the domestic scene.

In the opening to the story, Dagobert tells of the horrible tone; Angelika speaks of her horrifying dreams; and the conversation, in this “einheimischer Kreis” [“domestic circle”] (792), circles around talk of possession by unknown spirits, strange events, and “innerliche Schauer,” “an internal shivering.” The telling of these stories itself begins to bring about the uncanny it prepares. Dagobert himself makes the connection between the setting of the story—the storm outside, the sounds within—and the “spirits” it ushers in:

Die echten Sturmwind-, Kamin- und Punschschauer sind nichts anders, als der erste Anfall jenes unbegreiflichen geheimnisvollen Zustandes, der tief in der menschlichen Natur begründet ist, gegen den der Geist sich vergebens auflehnt, und vor dem man sich wohl hüten muß. Ich meine das Grauen—die Gespensterfurcht. Wir wissen alle, dass das unheimliche Volk der Spukgeister nur des Nachts, vorzüglich gern aber bei bösem Wetter der dunklen Heimat entsteigt und seine irre Wanderung beginnt . . . (793)
The real storm winds, the gruesome shivering of the hearth and the punch, are nothing other than the first attacks of that inconceivable secret condition which is grounded deep within human nature against which the spirit rebels in vain, and from which one must try to protect oneself. I mean the horror—the fear of ghosts. We all know that this uncanny folk of spirit-ghosts only emerge from their homeland at night, and preferably in stormy weather, to begin their mad wanderings. (3: 793)

Though the company agrees that Dagobert is teasing, nevertheless he both describes and performs the departure or partitioning of the visible, of what is present—the gurgling of the tea pot—which initiates the uncanny, leaving the homeland of its definition for its narrative spacing, its “irre Wanderung”—its mad wandering. The attribution of meaning to the incidentals of the tea-pot, for example, resemble the narrator of the man of the crowd’s efforts to find sense in the wandering of his object. Marguerite, Angelika’s French companion, suddenly drops a cup, as if “struck by a magnetic blow,” and is filled with horror (Schauer) (797). The accumulated anecdotes begin to bother the Obristin, who finally says “Immer ärger wird es mit unserm Gespräch, wir verlieren uns in Dinge, an die nur zu denken mir unerträglich ist. Ich fordere Sie auf, Moritz, sogleich etwas recht Lustiges, Tolles zu erzählen, damit es nur mit den unheimlichen Spukgeschichten einmal ende” (3: 802): “This conversation is getting worse and worse; we are getting lost in things which I cannot bear even to think about. I am asking you right now, Moritz, to tell us something funny and wonderful to put an end finally to these uncanny ghost stories!” Both beginning and end of the uncanny are elusive.

Moritz begs leave to tell one last story, which will form the last preparation for the entrance of the uncanny guest. He begins a story about a companion of his in war named Bogislav. Bogislav is haunted by some unknown force; Moritz relates: “... oft übermannte ihn plötzlich der Gedanke an irgend etwas Entsetzliches, das ihm begegnet sein müßte, und das die Spuren des tiefsten Grams auf seinem Gesicht zurückgelassen hatte” (3: 803) [“often he was overcome suddenly by the thought of something horrible which must have happened to him and had left the traces of the deepest affliction on his face”]. Finally, one night Bogislav reveals his secret. After killing a rival in a duel in Naples, Bogislav was inexplicably, incomprehensibly rejected by the fiancée for whose sake the murder was committed. The horrible death-voice of the murdered
count has haunted him ever since. In the following passage, Bogislav begins his narration which is interrupted as follows:


[Through the loudest thundering of cannons, through the crackling fire of the battalions muskets, I hear close to my ears the most horrible moan [Jammerton], and all the rage, all the despair of madness arises in my breast!—Just tonight’ Bogislav stopped suddenly, and I, along with him, was seized by horror, for just at that moment a long, heartbreaking moan could be heard as if coming down the hallway. Then it was as if someone were getting up from the floor, moaning and groaning, and approached with a heavy and uncertain step. Then suddenly, Bogislav jumped up from the chair, animated with tremendous strength, and cried, with a wild gleam in his eye and a thundering voice, ‘Appear, accursed one, if you can! I’m ready to fight you and all the hellish spirits at your command!’ Now there occurred a violent blow’—At that moment the doors of the room sprang open with a resounding clang.]

Bogislav’s telling is interrupted strangely by an actual tone, “wie vom gang herkommend,” as if coming down the hallway. The uncanny emerges at the hinge between narrative frames—where the Jammerton Bogislav narrates enters the narrative frame of that telling (recalling previous anecdotes about a strange Jammerton in then frame narrative—note). The coincidence of two frames brings about what Freud calls the confusion of the symbol and the symbolized. This uncanny effect takes place when language is seen to produce what it speaks of, epitomized by the ability of the repeated “uncanny” to bring about the effects of the uncanny or the capacity of the uncanny to engender itself. The uncanny comes about as it steps across from the level of the told to that of the telling, acting first as the “heavy, uncertain steps,” followed by the jammerton, and then the ghost called upon to appear.
The same type of non-coincidental coincidence of speech and event takes place in the final trajectory of Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher.” Similarly, a wild storm rages outside; to calm the ailing Usher, his friend begins to read out loud from a romance called “The Mad Tryst.” As passages are read aloud, the narrator hears corresponding sounds: “At the termination of this sentence I started and, for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described” (243). At the next instance, the sound the narrator hears answers precisely to the image pre-existing in his mind; his reading is exteriorized: “the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer” (244). Finally, Usher describes the premature burial and prophesies: “I tell you that she now stands without the door!” As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher” (245). The doubling between text and reality, the move from one narrative level to another, brings the uncanny home. It walks and opens the door.20 Similarly, in the passage from Hoffmann, Bogislav invokes his ghost; his speech is interrupted by the narrative: “Nun geschah ein gewaltiger Schlag”—In dem Augenblick sprang die Türe des Saals auf mit dröhndem Gerassel” (3: 805) [“Now there occurred a violent blow—At that moment the doors of the room sprang open with a resounding clang”21]. We expect to find the mystery solved, to see the ghost enter at the doorway; in fact we are ready to welcome in the uncanny guest. But the text continues, passing first over several lines of blank page: “Sowie Ottmar diese Worte las, sprang auch die Türe des Gartensaals wirklich dröhnd auf und die Freunde erblickten eine dunkle verhüllte Gestalt, die sich langsam mit unhörbaren Geisterschritten nahten. Alle starrten etwas entsetzt hin, jedem stockte der Atem” (3:805–6) [As Otmar read these words, the doors to the garden room actually really sprang open with a clang and the friends espied a dark cloaked figure slowing approaching with silent ghostly steps.
Everyone stared and gasped with horror]. This interruption, twice crossing over from telling to “reality,” seems to show us, or at least them—Bogislav and Moritz, on the one hand, or Moritz and the company in the Colonel’s house—the uncanny guest. But the interruption is actually deeper; that is to say, the uncanny figure actually appears in the frame narrative, outside the boundaries of “der Unheimliche Gast” proper. Soon it becomes clear that the arriving figure is in fact Cyprian, the missing member of the Serapion reading group. The uncanny continues here in reverse; for the friend has arrived in the dark garb of a stranger, interrupting the homey circle to which he actually belongs. This interior space, the garden house, is itself “outside.” Cyprian explains: “In vollem Unmut renne ich heraus ins Freie und der Zufall will, daß ich, nach der Stadt zurückkehrend, den Weg einschlage, der bei dem Gartenhause dicht herbeiführt” [“In a rotten mood, I hurried out of doors; coincidence would have it that, turning back towards town, I struck out on a path that led right by the garden house”]. Coincidentally, Cyprian is drawn to the garden house by the recognition of a familiar voice—something like the inverse of Lady Madeline’s arrival.


‘Du vergiß . . . dass Du die Ingredienzen zu dieser Erzählung von mir selbst empfingest. Ich bin es, der dich mit der Teufelstimme, mit der Luftmusik bekannt mache, der dir sogar die Idee der Erscheinung des unheimlichen Gastes gab, und ich bin begierig, wie du mein Thema ausgeführt hast etc.” (806)

[“I seem to be hearing a familiar voice, I peck through the window and see my worthy Serapionsbrothers and hear my Ottmar read the uncanny guest aloud.’ ‘What!’ Ottmar interrupted his friend, ‘how could you already know my story?’

‘You forget that you got the ingredients from this story from me. I am the one who acquainted you with the devil’s voice, and the air music—I even gave you the idea of the appearance of the uncanny guest, and I am eager to hear how you have carried out my theme.’”]

The “treuer Searpions-bruder” appears temporarily as an uncanny guest, unduly unnerving Theodor, one member of the group. The appearance of friend as stranger reverses the relation of familiarity (heimisch/unheimlich); likewise, he already knows the story that is about to be read, for he himself is its origin. The “idea” of the
uncanny guest arrvies from the outside and is thus separated from its appearance. This splitting is in fact constitutive of the uncanny guest; for notice Cyprian says: “Ich bin es . . . der dir sogar die Idee der Erscheinung des unheimlichen Gastes gab . . .” [“I am the one who even gave you the idea of the appearance of the uncanny guest . . .”]

The uncanny guest is defined as an appearance of an idea; the idea is not manifested—made present—by the guest, but rather comes forth in the process and the motion of his appearance. The idea of the appearance is simply to appear; the space of a ground or interior essence is vacant, held open only by the co-author Cyprian.

In fact, the appearance of the uncanny guest is his essence, precisely because the uncanny has no essential core. The uncanny crosses the threshold in the line, “In dem Augenblick sprang die Türe des Saals auf mit dröhndendem Gerassel” (805) [“At that moment the doors of the room sprang open with a resounding clang”], which at least seems to belong to three narrative levels: Bogislav’s tale, the homely scene in the Colonel’s house, and the reading scene of the Serapion-brothers’ garden-house. The collapse of narrative levels, made clear only when interrupted and corrected, enacts the lack of differentiation between reader and critic in Todorov’s terms; the text stumbles, interrupts the passage towards signification and points instead only to its own fictive mechanism: “The door suddenly opened.” Reading further, after the short conversation with Cyprian in which friend appears as uncanny guest, the scene around the hearth picks up again: “Hinein trat ein Mann von Kopf bis zu Fuß schwarz gekleidet, bleichen Antlitzes, ernsten, festen Blickes” (807) [“In walked a man dressed in black from head to toe, with a pale face and a serious fixed gaze”]. The group is struck into silence and can not get rid of the feeling of something uncanny attaching to this figure: “Keiner vermochte, wie gelähmt, ein Wort hervorzubringen” (808) [As if paralysed, no one could manage to get a word out”]. The uncanny cripples speech as the narrative staggers and stumbles, trips over itself. “Dagobert versuchte sich ins Gespräch zu mischen, das endlich in einzelnen abgebrochenen Reden mühsam fortschlich” [“Dagobert tried to get into the conversation that finally dragged on in small bits of broken up talk”]. Language drags itself around; lost in its own materiality, it can’t get off the floor of the body: “Jeder fühlte seine Brust beengt, jeden drückte wie eine Gewitterschwüle die Gegenwart des Fremden, jedem erstarb das Wort auf den Lippen, wenn er in das todbleiche Antlitz des unheimlichen Gastes schaue” (809) [“They all felt a tightening of the chest, the presence of the stranger pressed
upon them like the humid pressure of a storm, words died on their lips when they looked into the deathly pale face of the uncanny guest”). The uncanny breaks up language, leaving material remnants, in the presence of the strange, the confusion and exchange between friend and stranger, guest and intruder. Finally, the uncanny of narrative interruption clings to the guest who continues to seem uncanny despite all explanations to the contrary. The strange count with a foreign accent is finally identified as a friend of the colonel’s; but he continues to pull with him the conditions of his narrative appearance. As the story progresses, he is welcomed into the center of the family only finally to be revealed as a magnetizer, an uncanny magician who has secretly taken control of various members of the company.

Thus Count S—I passes from strangeness to familiarity and back again, showing himself finally to be the uncanny force he was at first mistaken to be. He thus was what he will become, or is what he is not. He is the uncanny guest only because he appears to be uncanny, through his narrative appearance, yet is not. The thematics of the magnetizer, like the problem of premature burial in The Fall of the House of Usher, is a decoy that draws attention away from the narrative vortex structuring the uncanny—the mise-en-abîme whose effect persists regardless of later thematic solutions or demystifications. The uncanny emerges in the capacity of narrative structure to outlive its thematic recuperation. It emerges in a narrative fold through which the synchronic collapses into the diachronic, historical happening adheres to a result, processes of signification contaminate any kind of signified. This fold is the fold of reading.

The uncanny comes about in showing its own generation out of the space and time of the materiality of language, in showing the origin of a meaning or a mind in a body that sits or walks. The word “uncanny” generates its signified. We can recognize this aspect of it as the crocodilic uncanny, in some senses a subset of the ambulatory uncanny, yet also a larger group; Freud tells us “daß es nämlich oft und leicht unheimlich wirkt, wenn die Grenze zwischen Phantasie und Wirklichkeit verwischt wirkt, wenn etwas real vor uns hintritt, was wir bisher für phantastisch gehalten haben wenn ein Symbol die volle leistung und Bedeutung des Symbolisierten übernimmt und dergleichen mehr” (12: 258) [“. . . an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality [walks up to us], or when a
symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on” (17: 244)]. The story reads:

Mitten in der Absperrung des Weltkrieges kam eine Nummer des englischen Magazins ‘Strand’ in meine Hände, in der ich unter anderen ziemlich überflüssigen Produktionen eine Erzählung las, wie ein junges Paar eine möblierte Wohnung bezieht, in der sich ein seltsam geformter Tisch mit holzgeschnitzten Krokodilen befindet. Gegen Abend pflegt sich dann ein unerträglich, charakteristischer Gestank in der Wohnung zu verbreiten, man stolpert im Dunkeln über etwas, man glaubt zu sehen, wie etwas Undefinierbares über die Treppe huscht, kurz, man soll erraten, daß infolge der Anwesenheit dieses Tisches gespenstische Krokodilen im Hause spuken . . .” (12: 258)

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; 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 soething of the sort. (244–45)

The uncanny effect of this story emerges in its telling, not in its truth. Through the disruptive frame of the World War, the tale comes into Freud’s hands, as if a fully random event. The emergence of the crocodiles is heralded by a stumbling around in the dark, hitting upon something. When the reader stumbles, the uncanny starts to walk. “Es war eine recht einfältige Geschichte, aber ihre unheimliche Wirkung verspürte man als ganz hervorragend” [“It was a naïve enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable”]. The uncanny is this imagined connection between signifier and signified, the imagined life of a fictional character, the autonomous movement of a sign, the progression of discourse through its “steps.”

The discourse of the uncanny destroys the illusion of a stable subject position, of a final meaning, of a sense separable from language and the body. It points to the finitude and temporality of thinking, as Weber makes clear in “Uncanny Thinking,” and “marks the spot where what is (there) and what is not, presence and absence, coming and going, can no longer be clearly distinguished.” Weber lets us consider that the uncanny still occupies a peripheral issue for
these very reasons: “For it confounds predication, judgment, and lets a certain form of ‘constative’ discourse reveal itself as always already ‘performative’” (21). As Hoffmann writes, “man war darüber einig, daß der Vorwurf des unheimlichen Wesens auf die zurückfalle, die ihm diesen Vorwurf gemacht” (“they were agreed that the charge of the uncanny falls back on the one who makes it”) (813).

The doubt and open-ended quality of Freud’s essay, as many have pointed out, is not simply a coincidental flaw in Freud’s discourse, just as the triple narrative interruption of “The Uncanny Guest” cannot be banned to a narrative frame, but rather takes part in the uncanny itself. Consider the language of Freud’s uncertainty in his well-known concern about the border between psychoanalysis and aesthetics:

So müssen wir wohl bereit sein anzunehmen, daß für das Auftreten des unheimlichen Gefühls noch andere als die von uns vorangestellten stofflichen Bedingungen maßgebend sind. Man könnte zwar sagen, mit jener ersten Feststellung sei das psychoanalytische Interesse am Problem des Unheimlichen erledigt, der Rest erfordere wahrscheinlich eine ästhetische Untersuchung. Aber damit würden wir dem Zweifel das Tor öffnen, welchen Wert unsere Einsicht in die Herkunft des Unheimlichen vom verdrängten Heimsichen eigentlich beanspruchen darf. (261)

[It is evident therefore, that we must be prepared to admit that there are other elements besides those which we have so far laid down as determining the production of uncanny feelings. We might say that these preliminary results have satisfied psycho-analytic interest in the problem of the uncanny, and that what remains probably calls for an aesthetic enquiry. But that would be to open the door to doubts about what exactly is the value of our general contention that the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed. (247)]

Where Freud puts his own thesis fully into question, the ambulatory uncanny responds, about which we cannot say for sure whether it is or is not, but of which it might be (un)safe to say: it walks.

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NOTES


Anthony Vidler’s book, *The Architectural Uncanny—Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, is an allusive survey of the uncanny as a phenomenon of modern alienation. Aptly analyzing a wide range of texts, he focuses on a specifically modern dialectic alienation between inside and outside underscored by the role of architecture. In *The Architecture of Deconstruction—Derrida’s Haunt* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), Mark Wigley follows Heidegger in arguing that “the process of alienation is understood to be an ancient one that is only becoming manifest with modernity” (98). Nicholas Royle’s recent *The Uncanny* provides encyclopedic coverage of the topic, including many astute analyses and thorough bibliography. The devotion of a book-length study to the uncanny, however, cannot help but position it as a theme and an object. But the uncanny undermines the identity of any member of a comparison and thus leads to ultimately illegible distortions and disaggregations. For example, Avital Ronell writes: “This . . . is your habitation in the world, this your *unheimlich* familiarity prior to any opposition of the ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ or ‘self’ and ‘other’ . . .” *The Telephone Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 69. Maria Tatar has contributed to the discussion of Hoffmann and the uncanny in “E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘Der Sandmann’: Reflections and Romantic Irony” *MLN* 95 (1980), 585–608, which also provides an excellent summary of prior secondary literature; and in “The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny,” *Comparative Literature*, 33: 2 (Spring 1981), 167–182. The introductory essay in *Ghosts—Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, eds. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Macmillan Press, 1999) gives a good overview of the importance of the destabilizing effect of the uncanny in the three fields it names along with a wide variety of more specialized essays.


Weber uses the word “chiaroscuro” to talk about the movements of concealing/revealing pertinent to Heidegger. The moment of “Mystery” indicated here is reminiscent of Shelley’s poem, “Lift not the painted veil”—a veil that, like the poetic narrative that presents it, conceals the nothing that it does not reveal.

In both “Zur Seinsfrage” and Einführung in die Metaphysik, the terms “aufbrechen” and “Aufbruch” describe the “irrupting” or breaking open of Being. Both Grimm and Wahrig point to the use of this word to describe the opening up of a wound that begins to bleed anew. It also means “to leave,” with military connotations: to break camp, to mobilize, to get going. Weber mentions the military overtones of the terms “Musterung,” “the marshaling of forces, conscription, constraint and conflict” (210) and of Heidegger’s term *auseufen*, “to move out, as an army would do,” but also “to back out” (26–27). The primary meaning of *aufbrechen* is given as “to break open,” as of a box, castle or door; and additionally, to break open the earth in plowing; or the breaking out, the opening, of plant buds. It is also no coincidence that Heidegger, like Schelling, associates the uncanny with the


13 Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Vintage, 1975), 475. Poe doesn’t correct the gender of the pronoun, thus presaging the collapse of the story and “the man.” In this edition, the a is without an umlaut as well.

14 In terms of what Derrida first called “logocentrism,” presence asserts the priority of meaning over the history of its coming to be. Meaning shines forth in presence and is present to the subject; writing is instrumentalized and located at the exterior of meaning. At least, this is how it “should” be. One could interpret the history of western metaphysics as one long attempt to enforce this hierarchical model. Already in Plato, as is well known, the quarrel between philosophy and literature displays the threat of the letter; the display of its autonomy and its contribution to the production of meaning is noxious and dangerous and must be put down. Derrida’s critique of logocentrism as the interpretation of the meaning of meaning (as well as Being) as presence (and writing as absence) and Heidegger’s critique of the model of adequation converge in the uncanny.


17 In “Freud and the Sandman,” Neil Hertz points out: “The feeling of the uncanny would seem to be generated by being reminded of the repetition compulsion, not by being reminded of whatever it is that is repeated. The becoming aware of the process is felt as eerie, not the becoming aware of some particular item” (101). In this sense, the origin of the uncanny is always receding, since it occurs as a recollection that is part of the structure of repetition. Hertz draws attention to Freud’s sense of figurative language as what “gives color” to impulses and thus allows them to appear. His essay proposes a “compound analogy . . . between that-which-is-repeated, coloring matter, and figurative language. All three, I suggested, could be thought of as means of representing processes and energies that might otherwise go unnoticed. But this model seems unsatisfactory and wishful in at least two ways. First, it depends upon the notion of a real preexistent force (call it sheer repetition, the death instinct, or whatever) that is merely rendered more discernable by that-which-is-repeated, or by the lurid colors of the erotic, or by some helpful figure of speech . . . But we know that the relation between figurative language and what it figures cannot be adequately grasped in metaphors of vision; and we might well doubt that the forces of repetition can be isolated—even ideally—from that-which-is-repeated” (120–121). The relationship I am suggesting between the uncanny and repetition is rather one of synonymity; the uncanny appears through repetition and vice versa. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe
analyzes the uncanny in terms of the appearance of repetition “itself,” that is, of what cannot simply “appear” but is only recognized later. The uncanny is here fundamentally related to rhythm and its action to “la césure du sujet.” *Le Sujet de la Philosophie* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1979) 283–285.

18 Quoted in Manfred Wacker’s afterward to E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Das öde Haus* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1969) 85. For Goethe as the father of German literature, see Avital Ronell, *Dictations—On Haunted Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).


20 The prominence of walking in the uncanny could be described as a collapse of the figurative into the literal. On the other hand, it could also be read the other way around, as if material or literal elements are doubles by figurative or animated counterparts. Adam Bresnick argues for the latter in focusing on the problem of animation in “The Sandman” in his essay, “Prosopoetic Compulsion: Reading the Uncanny in Freud and Hoffmann,” *The Germanic Review* 71.2 (1996): 114–132. Investigating “the reality of aesthetic experience,” Bresnick speaks of a reader where I would note only a shift of diegetic level; likewise what temporarily occupies the position of referent or “reality” simply belongs to another opening discursive frame. The uncanny seems to me to be generated through the passage through and across frames; thus literal and figurative senses can only be pinpointed at relative positions. Bresnick sees the moment of animation as a narcissistic over-investment—the prosopoetic compulsion. He tends to pathologize psychologically what I would identify rather with a feature of reading in general.

21 Translations of “Der Unheimliche Gast” are mine. References are to E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Die Serapions-Brüder*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1983).