

"I DO NOT LIKE TO BE ANOTHER"

THE UNCANNY IN CHILDREN*

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It's not common to refer, in children's psychoanalysis, to the feeling of uncanny, the Unheimlich. As Freud indicates, the study of that feeling is difficult because "the sensitivity to such sentiment exists in very different degrees in different individuals" and the latter assertion is doubly true in children: children's sensitivity to this feeling is very different in each case, but the difficulty increases because the adults that take care of them do not seem to worry about finding in their relationship with these children that, poorly defined, feeling. When children speak spontaneously about this type of sensations, they generally say that they feel "weird" and it's necessary to adjust oneself to this experience to bring it to light and enable children to talk more about it. When considering the case of certain children, keeping in mind the existence of this affection, the Unheimlich and the fact that it can emerge in them, one perceives that many states of fear or discomfort would be best described with the concept of uncanny. As Freud says these feelings of strangeness may be related to the external reality or to "a part of our own self"; in this case the agreement is to speak of "depersonalization" "the uncanny feelings and the depersonalization are a part of the same category" says Freud.

There is a striking contrast between the void in psychoanalytic literature when it comes to children and the abundance of strange and disturbing themes present in children's literature. In most of the stories narrated to children arouses the "uncanny" affection. Strange and disturbing Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, disturbing and strange lodging, the ogre's house where Tom Thumb takes shelter, strange and disturbing woman Snow White's stepmother... Regarding to children's cartoons and films, in them are developed ad nauseam strange, unfamiliar images,

* Originally published in: De l'âge bête : La période de latence, 2011: Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 1-15.

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It is strange or disturbing to remark this poverty in the psychoanalytic literature considering that this affective disposition, when it appears for the first time in the work of Freud, it's in reference to a child. The Rat Man was six years old and he already had erections "and he says": "There were people, some of them good, that I liked a lot and desired violently to see them naked". However when experiencing those desires, he had a feeling of uncanny, as if something would have happened if he thought like that and as if he should have done everything possible to prevent it." What it could have happened to this child was the death of his father.

Despite the introduction of the concept, psychoanalysts have spoken of distress and anxiety but they didn't care about in what this affection might have been specific. It is possible that the frequent relation of this affection with phobic manifestations could have caused the neglect of what is original in them compared with fear and anguish.

Furthermore the disturbing strangeness that directly involves the ego, the depersonalization, allows better to be seized by the adult or the adolescent; it disgusts us to use the term depersonalization in children since we are talking of persons under construction, in "personation" to resume the P.C. Racamier's term and it should be considered that disorganization or regression are more easily spoken of. Another element that certainly slows down the use of the term and therefore the study of the phenomenon is the use made of it in the adult psychiatric clinic where it is often used as being characteristic of psychotic symptoms. Although it is true that deep and prolonged states are observed along the psychotic syndromes, moments of depersonalization can practically be observed in the most common neurotic structures during the entire psychoanalytic cure, but the silence of the authors does not preclude the existence of these uncanny feelings in children.

Let us listen to Christophe, he's ten years old and he has problems with his mother and an equally demanding teacher; the mother has suffered from anorexia some time ago and spent considerable energy in getting diplomas, the child feels responsible for the maternal fatigue and finds in sports, in which he's very successful, a field of action freed from the direct influence of the mother: "Since I arrive at the stadium, everything changes." This sense of change is peculiar as it involves a sense of self-observation and of modification of the outside world: "I look like on TV, it happens when I'm happy and when I'm tired, it's the same, except that when I'm tired it's sad, all around me it's like on TV." Those moments of fatigue, he complains about, happen after the intensive efforts he imposed himself in order to get good grades, and they appear as soon as he realizes that those efforts are unsuccessful and his grades are not good, he

feels tired and he has the impression of a change around him. In this case one can legitimately speak of depersonalization, and of the uncanny. This feeling appears here in two different registers, one of success and one of failure. This double possibility of appearance seems fundamental.

Talek is nine years old and during the second session of his psychotherapy he speaks of himself in terms that imply an experience of depersonalization. In the first meeting he evoked a surgery he suffered; he begins his second session by saying: "You seem not to get nervous, your appearance is calm. It is not the same with my older brother. It is not that I don't love my brother, but with someone calm I feel that my heart, that my belly are relaxed. "Then after asking some questions about me, he asks: "What has been the most beautiful day of your life?" And after my intervention returning his question he says: "maybe one day will be the happiest day of my life, but for now the happiest day of my life is the day of my birth," and he explains the reason: "because that they I was me, I love being me, I hate to be another." He tells me that when he works poorly in his studies and he gets bad grades he feels he is another, "I don't feel like me, I'm desperate, I'm an ass, I feel like another ass like me." Some sessions later an evocative material brought again an uncanny experience: "a football ball is tough, how can it be that the foot is not broken when it hits it? I saw a skeleton, the bones of the foot are not kept well together; I'm not in a hurry to see my skeleton. "The feeling of the unfamiliar touches, here, the body of the child himself; Sometimes it can be seen states in which the disturbing experience involving the body acquires considerable proportions as in a boy of ten, psychotic, boarding pupil in an institution, that after a smallpox vaccine that had no consequences, but a slight pustule, found himself immersed in a state of uncontrollable anxiety, convinced that he was going to die, a state that evoked certain disclosures of depersonalization seen in psychotic adults.

Another aspect of the uncanny can be seen in certain children when faced with written language or math.

Gaspard that ended (*échouer*) in a medical-educational institute because he couldn't learn to read and after several years of preparatory course, he looks at the letters of an ophthalmological board hanging on the wall and says: "In Daniel et Valérie¹ I can read, but I don't know how to read those letters." He approaches the board, lively and at the same time furtively as if to surprise those enigmatic letters, and after his failure he concludes: "These letters are too difficult." They are, in any case, foreign to

¹ Series of children's literature

his system and lacking of any familiarity and the child's behavior leaves an unusual impression that allows suggesting that the observer is triggered because he perceives in the child a sense of uncanny. Another child is a good reader, but he doesn't like maths and grieves and weeps facing a mathematical problem that begins with an unusual, treacherous, incomprehensible word, that he reads "gazule" when it really is "calculate". This child after having baptized a turtle with the name "gazule" stopped all trade with mathematics and today teaches letters.

There are other examples found by the adult, in analysis, as the Rat Man that has been transposed into a literary creation.

We mention the example brought by a young woman who in analysis rediscovers a feeling she had had when she was eight, "I seemed to be on another planet and everything around me, was foreseen to make me believe that I was a terrestrial." This impression went back to a period following her parent's divorce during which she felt constantly foreign; she clung strongly to the idea that "everything was foreseen" around her she kept calm thinking that then nothing bad could happen to her.

In *The waves*, Virginia Woolf shows us a child, Neville, who tries to rediscover a sense of uncanny that he had lived the day before. He stands again on the same step on which he has set his foot while he heard "the cook remove the baking sheets from the oven when talking about a dead man," describing him with an open throat in a stream. In this way, the author describes the uncanny moment lived by Neville at the time: "The apple tree leaves kept still against the sky; the moon watched with her fixed eye; my foot, despite me, remained on the step and the blood of that man running to the stream, his cheek was white as a piece of hake". "Death under the apple tree" is the name that, that contraction, that rigidity will be always kept in my mind. There were, pale gray floating clouds, and the ruthless, implacable tree with its bark of embossed silver. My life bitted in vain ... I could not move onto something else. There was an obstacle. I said to myself, "I cannot overcome this incomprehensible obstacle. And the others remained indifferent. Meanwhile we are all overwhelmed as much by the curse of the apples, by the merciless tree that we cannot overtake".

Freud says: "The no familiar new thing needs something more to achieve the uncanny character ". All he says in the article, devoted to the "uncanny" about the occurrence conditions of this affection, implies the return of a repressed content, "revived by an external content." However the return of the repressed in the obsessive neurosis, for example, it's usually accompanied by anxiety and only at certain times of a sense of uncanny. It must be assumed, then, a particular ego state to cause this

affection. Freud, for example, indicates that the "uncanny appears easily whenever the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased," which cannot occur unless the ego is in such a state that the secondary processes fails. To summarize, two elements are essential to the emergence of the uncanny:

- That a repressed content is refreshed by an external element.
- The "ego" is in such a state that the anguish is not what is revealed.

If we refer to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, the anguish «is related to waiting» is the "anxiety of something" and so it corresponds to a certain condition of ego organization in relation to a pulsional motion linked to a representation. Anxiety anticipates the situation presumed like distressing. In revenge, the uncanny arises unexpectedly. The repressed representation surprises the ego that has not foreseen or sensed and it is like unarmed; it can, in a second time, feel distress after a time lived as unusual, strange, disturbing, the qualifying "disturbing" indicating the secondary proximity of anxiety.

What are the conditions that allow the ego to be surprised, unarmed in this way?

It can happen during traumatic situations where the processing possibilities of the ego are suddenly overwhelmed in the course of the economic reorganizations imposed by the loss of a very invested object. Only a being is missing and everything appears to be strangely deserted, or when, as described by Maurice Bouvet's work about the depersonalization, the subject lives a "getting close" made possible precisely by "the weakening of neurotic defenses by the analysis, or the burst, the spraying of the very poor adaptations of subjects suffering from depersonalization neurosis." But there are moments of uncanny arising in subjects that have all their neurotic resources, of whom it cannot be said that suffer from a "depersonalization neurosis" and in the course of seemingly anodyne situations. It is one of the examples that Freud brings in "*A disorder of memory on the Acropolis*", the feeling of strangeness that he describes (" what I see there is not real ") links him directly to the emergence of the feeling of having surpassed his father: "That day, on the Acropolis, I could have said to my brother: Remember our youth ... and now we are in Athens, here we are on the Acropolis, such a long journey...". "Our father was a businessman, Athens did not mean too much for him." In Freud's example, there is a psychic movement that brings into play an essential identificatory register. The same thing happens for another personal example that Freud tells us: he does not recognize himself in "the man of a certain age, in *robe de chambre*

and travel cap", who is none other than his reflection in the mirror of the compartment door. Maurice Bouvet writes: "I have found, regularly, depersonalization in each occasion when the problem of the introjection, in all its forms, is posed in the regressive subjects... "(The same author evokes the greatest forms of depersonalization). For him, indeed, depersonalization is linked to what he calls "the conflict of introjection", "to put it another way, the conflict between the need for identification and the fear that it arouses", this fear in turn linked to aggressive projections on the identification object. To Evelyne Kestemberg it also exists "a constant correlation between the sense of identity's disorders and the identification difficulties linked to the oedipal conflict." Thus, when there are movements in the subject's identificatory register, that subject is more likely to express feelings of uncanny. Such feelings can range from a sense of amazement, such as the one described by Freud on the Acropolis, till states of very strong depersonalization. When the *Unheimlich* is exceeded, it results in a feeling of joy and "one feels like a hero who has performed incredible feats" as Freud says about the satisfaction experienced in front of the realization of dreams that, for a long time, were considered unworkable. It is therefore necessary to consider that the child is particularly exposed to the feelings of the uncanny: the mechanisms that will constitute his "Ego" are in enrichment progress, the identification processes are very active, with the "conflicts of identification" that they imply; the magical thinking is very close, the processes of repression are constantly changing and reorganizing. We have come to think that the child shows very often that sense of the unusual disturbing and that is certainly the very familiarity of the child with this affection, that lacks of expression (unlike distress, manifested more clearly) that has rejected his study. The so-called eight month anxiety is probably, and especially, more an uncanny than an anxiety; the "mirror stage" of J. Lacan is considered valid from the *Unheimlich*, the joy experienced by the child that recognizes his own image would correspond to overcoming the feeling of strangeness. In some children, the bodily concerns, the particular perceptions of the own body -that sometimes lead them to make uncoordinated movements and gesticulations- can certainly be related to impressions of depersonalization. The link with an identificatory problem may be the one that H. Searles found in some adult patients: "The feeling of having a grossly distorted and incomplete head, the way certain patients experience it, it is partly explained by the repressed feelings in relation to the stupidity of one of the parents; in the same way, the feeling that the genital region or other body parts are distorted or incomplete, experienced by other patients, has its origin primarily in a repressed contempt for the mother's breasts". The interest in the clowns, the grotesque and bizarre figures, the caricatures, could be linked to such feelings. Indeed, if the successful identification with one of the parents, good enough, goes beyond the initial project may, as in the case of Freud, lead to an uncanny impression; these

unusual disturbing affections may often appear in the identificatory movements with difficult parents, in moments of disappointment. Searles, in such cases, writes for example, that the child "in his effort to sustain the adored and admired figure that he needs in the outer reality, introjects the lacks of the mother and he feels them like elements that form part more of himself than of hers (...). This introjection process, that begins even earlier the formation of his body image, is one of the responsible factors for the incomplete body image of the schizophrenic adult." This Searles' proposal, to some extent, matches with the one of Maurice Bouvet expressed in more general terms, according to which, at the origin of severe depersonalization states a latent narcissistic wound -received at the age of differentiation of the ego and the not-ego- can be found, which explains the inability of the subject to normally live without a narcissistic object" (i.e., an object on whose unconditional and absolute possession depends the maintenance of the ego structuration).

In a very different register, one of my patients remembers the strange feeling she experienced one day in front of the gaze of her father. He was coming back after an absence of several months, during which the girl had her first period and she had seen develop her breasts and hips. The look of her father, his expression, involved a change in their exchanges, in their respective identities.

The ego reacts touched by the affection. An anxiety may develop in relation to an unusual situation and, whether it is intense, a phobia may appear. However in some cases, it appears that children treat this affection as such with different processes which vary according to the intensity. First, it is necessary to realize that children play with this affection. When they are little, they ask the father to put an angry face, that he make unusual gestures on the condition that the father interrupt the game to the first request. All games with grimaces involve the idea of transforming what is familiar into unfamiliar to link them and then make reference to the uncanny. Thus, the clowns are strange and, as Michel Soulé has noted, they produce anxiety in young children and they do not cause laughter except when it has been established the latency period and some control of the affections. Tales and stories can be a way to play with the *Unheimlich*. "The uncanny often and easily arises each time when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased," as we have said. In tales for children, these boundaries disappear and if Freud explicitly says that "I could not cite a single fairy tale in which something uncanny does not happen," we can think that he is placed in the position and point of view of the adult reader, to such an extent the children's body-language, to whom texts of Grimm brothers or Andersen are read, involves feelings and reactions to the unusual. What appears in Freud's article is that each age (and each reader) has a literature that may subject him to the uncanny. We have seen the boy described by Virginia Woolf trying to regain the disturbing affection experienced the day before. The child looks at the stories

and games to awaken affection to ensure its control. Throughout the story's the uncanny affection experienced by the child are transposed and contained in a symbolic set isolated from the external reality and designated as a story. It is interesting to confirm that in the stories, the uncanny appears on the moment when the hero changes the register, when he access to a new identificatory threshold, when an element of knowledge, a progress, an access to the adult's world appears in different terms, when he experiences an initiation. Red Riding Hood must go alone into the forest, "as if she was older"; Tom Thumb was surprised by a secret that his parents exchanged, the secret of the primal scene: how babies are made? replaced by its opponent in the manifest content of the story: how to get rid of them? Cinderella, alias Cucendron, leaves the grayness and the anality of the latency period to replace them with dance and genitality; mice, lizards, pumpkin, suffer strange transformations; it is because she has become a woman that Bluebeard's wife holds the key to a bloody place: uncanny husband. Thus, in stories we find this solicitation of the identificatory movement that breaks the previous balance and triggers the affection.

In some subjects, the illusion plays the role of control of the uncanny. The patient that we mentioned above thought to be from another planet, she used to tell stories in which she was lost and she restarted a new life; these stories often took a fantastic way and, once an adult, she is a tireless reader of science fiction.

The age of the children that have given me the clinical material is in the latency period, the uncanny affections are exceeded relatively well to the extent that the child develops harmoniously. Except in the case of trauma or seductions, the step that represents the latency puts the child relatively sheltered from moments of strong depersonalization as those of the adolescence. In revenge, the installation in the latency, that is, in terms of mental functioning, the abandonment of Oedipal project, and the set of re-investitures regarding the new roles proposed by the adults to the child, involve all kinds of facilitations for uncanny experiences and many reactions to new tasks, before the school learning, should be addressed considering this particular affection.

The abandonment of the oedipal project involves a considerable rearrangement of the investitures, both regarding to his parental objects in his outer reality, and in relation to the investiture of his internalized imagos. The narcissistic investitures are completely rearranged and the role of the identificatory processes in relation to parents is critical. The vulnerability of children in this period with regard to the disappointments, traumas, coming from parents, is linked to this rearrangement.

In this period and during latency, the role playing, the costumes, the "as if" game, are ways to control, to arouse affection and surpassing it. Playing doctor is certainly a way to satisfy curiosity but perhaps even more a means of achieving this control of this triggered uncanny, Freud tells us, in view of the female sexual organs. When *Unheimlich* feelings are too intense, too painful, involving identification charged of unbearable projections, the child may seek to avoid any situation that entails the risk of emergence of this affection. These are children who hate to play role games, they fear novelty, they limit their interests, they show an attitude of boredom, and they do not want to be astonished with anything. The latter attitude is evident in the adolescent and can be found later in adults who utter that the more you change, the more is the same thing. René Diatkine evokes willingly the closed psychoanalytic theories that allow their holders to never be astonished. The real surprise, the recognition of the novelty involves at least the shadow of *Umheimlich*: the new must be identified, i.e. to change something in itself, in its point of view. If the view is built on belief, in narcissistic wall against all internal reorganization, the new will be rejected since it is new and refitted by all means to the previous system. Another way to protect oneself against the astonishment of discovery is to look for amaze out of all reference to reality, to look for rekindle this affection on the other. These subjects like the metaphysicians of JLBorges, "never seek the truth even probable, they seek the amazement"

In the "as if" personalities of Hélène Deutsch, it is a way of struggle of this order against depersonalization that comes into play; in the child, the mythomaniacs behaviors may respond to a struggle against uncanny feelings, when no identificatory solution is possible. In the register of the act, we have seen children playing with danger, they climbed precipitously on cornices or gutters, they passed "whole days climbed on the trees", and that in the course of the interviews, they showed a sense of discomfort in the way they were experiencing the reality outside their own body, his extremely blurry identifications; they found a way out of this malaise through a brutal identification with the role of whom disturbs or causes terror. Certain serious and incomprehensible criminal behaviors in children correspond to a state of inorganization, a lack of a consistent identification, a no personalization state rather than of depersonalization, or more exactly no-personalization-depersonalization, some identificatory elements constituting a fragile tissue that tears at the slightest setback.

Clinical and theoretical issues that may be considered in relation to the affection of *Unheimlich* in the child are then numerous and we have only outlined some of them. The uncanny in the child exists, children experience and the Rat Man kept a special remembrance as he put it to Freud. As it is linked to the vicissitudes of the identificatory processes we think it as an inevitable and inherent affection for the child development. Each new acquisition involves some surprise of the Ego and the breakup of a vested

balance, this break is perceived in the form of an uncanny affection. This can range from amazement to depersonalization; the reactions of the "Ego" versus the *Unheimlich* surprise can range from the pleasure of discovery, from the pleasure of the Ego's functioning that discovers and extends to the disorganizing anxiety that accompanies an experience of intense depersonalization. Any new investment comprises a portion of repetition, but all new investiture amazes and transforms. "I finally understand that - said Marot - love is of a strange nature."