Anxiety: The Uncanny Borderline of Psychoanalysis?

Samuel Weber
Northwestern University

Freud begins his well-known essay on the Uncanny with a disclaimer that raises the question of why he writes the essay in the first place. This text argues that the explanation is to be found in the shift his thinking was undergoing at the time, not only in moving "Beyond the Pleasure Priniple" but also in rethinking its relation to Anxiety.

"Borderlines *in* Psychoanalysis—Borderlines *of* Psychoanalysis:" The topic of our conference situates us in a "borderline" area: between the two prepositions, "in" and "of." Borderlines "of" psychoanalysis suggests its relation to and demarcation from that which is *exterior* to it: other forms of psychotherapy, psychology, psychiatry, to name the most proximate "others"; but that exteriority could be extended at will, and according to one's preference, to include philosophy, literature, the arts, society, politics, ethics, etc. How Psychoanalysis demarcates itself from these other disciplines and areas that are commonly taken to be "outside" it, is not, however, for psychoanalysis itself a merely extraneous question. Rather, it is one involving its self-definition. For a major part of all self-definition entails the way in which the self demarcates itself from what it is not. Freud was constantly involved in such demarcations, and interestingly enough increasingly from former pupils and followers: Adler, Jung, Rank are just a few of the names that come to mind. In this sense the question or problem of determining the "borderlines of psychoanalysis" is as old as psychoanalysis itself.[1]

But it is the other preposition, *in,* that positions psychoanalysis even more, with respect to its "borderlines." In order to unpack this assertion, it is necessary to emphasize that the little word, *in,* more perhaps than any other single word, characterizes the period of Western modernity in which we still are very much situated, despite the fascination exercised by the notion of the "post-modern." For the "modern" period has always defined itself as "post," as that which comes *after* a period from which it seeks to assert its independence. And the basis of that assertion in turn has been an unshakeable and yet extremely vulnerable belief *in* the priority of the "in"—and first and foremost, of its *own immanence*—over everything else. This has been called "autonomy"—the autonomy of "reason" for instance, or of self-consciousness, or of society, or of history, or of knowledge; the list could be extended at will. But whatever the object, or subject, what distinguishes both is this predominance assigned to a defined space of self-containment, the space that defines and protects the "inside" against the "outside," while at the same time establishing that binary opposition as an irreducible and defining epistemic and indeed ontological paradigm.

It is this paradigm that generally informs the very notion of "borderline" in general and in particular as it used in most psychological, psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourse: namely to distinguish *between* two different states, each of which is considered to be more or less self-identical, which is to say: self-contained. A "borderline personality" would thus be a personality that oscillates on the border between neurosis and psychosis. The "borderline" in such usage thus designates the line separating two states or syndromes that can in principle, if not always in practice, be clearly distinguished from one another.

With respect to its complicity with the "in," the "borderline" is generally understood as a line of demarcation, as a line that separates rather than joins, or rather that separates without at the same time joining. If, however, one reads the writings of Freud carefully—and I will be limiting myself primarily to his writings rather than to the far more vast and variegated field designated by "psychoanalysis"—then one of its distinguishing characteristics is precisely to put into question the coherent interiority of the processes he is attempting to articulate. And by thus questioning their interiority, he implicitly disrupts the paradigm and hierarchy of the "inside" over the "outside" and thereby transforms the notion of "border," if not of the "line," so that it no longer separates the inside from the outside, or one inside from another. Rather it traverses what has previously been considered to constitute a homogeneous domain—that of the "psyche," thereby fracturing it and redefining it as a force-field in which conflicts play themselves out but are rarely resolved in a unified manner.

For Freud then—and this is surely one of the distinctive and innovative contributions of psychoanalysis as he introduced it—the "borderline" does not separate two self-contained and self-identical units or realms from one another: it separates the unit from itself. It is "internal," but only insofar as it dislocates the interior, spacing it out as a stage on which conflicts play themselves *out.*

Thus, the two main perspectives through which Freud construes what he calls the "psyche"—and note that he uses neither the term "subject" nor that of "self"—are that of the topical and the dynamic.[2] The former is a function of the latter, but also explains how the latter functions. The topical is a function of the dynamic insofar as this latter term—not entirely appropriate by the way—designates the conflictual force-field that both structures and destructures the psyche. This dual tendency, both to structure and to destructure, requires essentially spatial and topical categories in order to be adequately thought. Space, as Hegel observed, is the domain of externality, of *Auseinandersein* and of *Nebeneinandersein*: it is the domain of disunity. This essential disunity of the psyche, which requires a topographical approach to be thought, is what results when conflicts define and determine, but are not resolved by the effects they bring forth.

All of this crystallizes around the theory of the I—and I note in passing, that I will translate Freud's second topic as "I," "It" and "Over-I" rather than accepting the traditional terminology of Ego, Id and Superego. I do this because I consider it essential that with Freud, as with other thinkers (such as Heidegger and Benjamin), the relation to colloquial, non-technical language be preserved and not be sacrificed to a technical vocabulary that adds nothing in exactitude while eliminating precisely the experiential associations that the German words tend to preserve. Precisely because Freud thinks in terms of "It" and of "I," he does not resort to the discourse of the subject, which Lacan sought to reintroduce, in my eyes wrongly, into psychoanalytical discourse. Even less does he speak of the "self," nor does he use the word "personality" as an emphatic category. It is important, I believe, to retain the fact that what takes the place of the "subject"—in part, at least, for no one thing takes its place entirely, and that is precisely the point—involves a so-called "personal pronoun" but one that designates an impersonal gender. This "it" introduces a third dimension that opens up the binary structure of gender to an irreducible alterity and heterogeneity.[3]

The "it" can be said to take the place of the subject in one respect only: it supplants the originating and constitutive function that a certain modernity—since Descartes at least—associates with it, and more precisely with its function as self-consciousness. But of course the "it" is only one third of the topical "story" Freud devises, next to the "I" and the "over-I." The "I" above all is described as both a "surface" and a "body-I." It is a surface-I insofar as it is constituted in the space between "it" and what Freud diversely calls either the "world" or "reality"—which, however else they may be determined, designate a space that is both "external" and alien to the "I" and to the "it." Does this mean that Freud himself accepts what I have called the modern paradigm based on the opposition of "inside" and "outside"? To an extent yes. But what is decisive is the way he disrupts the basis on which that paradigm has been constructed and defended ever since Descartes sought absolute certitude in the realm of the mind thinking itself as an I: *cogito me cogitans.* For it is precisely such certitude, based on the ultimate and structural unity of thinking individuated as self-consciousness, that Freud's topical-dynamic-conflictual approach to the psyche upsets. Or rather, resituates. Resituates as the essential but impossible effort of the "I" precisely to mediate, not just between inside and outside, between "it" and "world," but to mediate within, between "it" and "over-I." [4]

The I is thus not just the surface through which the psyche confronts the world: it is the surface on which the contradictory messages and impulses of "it" and "over-I" collide with one another. It would not therefore be an exaggeration to describe the I therefore as itself essentially and inescapably a "borderline" function: In "The I and the It" Freud calls it a *Grenzwesen*, which could be translated as a "borderline being," seeking to mediate between "World and it." With characteristic tongue-in-cheek—a tone that all too often is overlooked by many of his readers, and even more by those who don't read him very much at all, while claiming to follow in his footsteps (and indeed to improve upon them)— Freud goes on to compare the I in this, its impossible borderline situation, with both the psychoanalyst and the politician:

> [The I] actually behaves like the physician in the analytical therapy, insofar as it proposes itself, with its respect for the real world, to the It as a libido-object and seeks to draw its libido toward itself. It is not only the helper of the It, but also its submissive servant who courts his master's love. […] In this intermediary position between the It and reality [the I] all too often succumbs to the temptation of becoming servile [*liebdienerisch*], opportunistic and mendacious, somewhat like a politician who despite his better insights still wants to keep favor with public opinion.[5]

Freud starts his comparison with the analyst and winds up with the politician, but both connections should be taken seriously. The I provides on the one hand the model both for political sovereignty and order, and for its therapeutic reinforcement. But the comparison works to undercut both the sovereignty of the statesman and the efficacy of the analyst. If the I can be compared to the analyst, the analyst can, and perhaps must, be compared to the I, and the comparison does not turn out very favorable to the analyst—unless the analyst is willing and ready to accept the general challenge to subjective sovereignty that Freud implies in also comparing the politician to the I. For the I winds up not just mediating between, but making all sorts of concessions to the It (and by implication the Over-I) that it seeks to reconcile—concessions that involve it in servility, opportunism and mendacity. And concessions that above all by no means achieve the goal of reestablishing or preserving anything like autonomy, sovereignty or even "freedom." The chapter of the essay in which these observations are inscribed is significantly entitled, "The Dependencies of the I" (*Die Abhängigkeiten des Ichs*), and indeed it is from the perspective of such "dependencies" that the I ultimately has to be thought.

In the final pages of his essay, what Freud describes as the results of the dependencies of the I gravitate around its relation to anxiety and to death. And here we arrive at what I would call the constitutive "borderline" of Freud's psycho-analytic thinking as such: its relation to anxiety and to death. What is crucial is that Freud insists on linking both of these factors, however different they may be, to the precarious instance or agency that he calls the "I":

> The I is in fact the actual seat of anxiety. Threatened by three sorts of dangers [i.e. from external reality, from the It and from the Over-I—SW], the I develops the reflex of fleeing, withdrawing its own engagement (*Besetzung*) from the threatening perception or from the similarly evaluated process in the It, and releasing it as anxiety. This primitive reaction will later be replaced by the construction of defensive engagements (*Besetzungen*) (mechanism of phobias). (287/60)

This linkage of anxiety to the I, coming shortly after the association of the I with the analyst and the politician, sets the scene for what I want to suggest, in the rest of this paper, constitutes the internal borderline that separates psychoanalysis from itself, and which concerns precisely what an earlier English translation of Freud's most significant later essay, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,* called: "The Problem of Anxiety."

Anxiety remains a constant concern of Freud's, both before he actually elaborates what will be known as psychoanalysis, as well as throughout that elaboration. It remains a constant concern, because it challenges the internal coherence and cohesion of the psychoanalytic discourse he is simultaneously striving to elaborate. It is anxiety, however, that is both before and beyond the pleasure principle, in ways that resist and disrupt all of Freud's attempts to absorb and integrate it into the system of concepts he is constructing—and continually also revising.

Several of Freud's earliest publications dealt with the symptomatology, etiology and general theory of "anxiety neuroses," and long before he developed his properly psychoanalytic theory of the I, anxiety appeared in those essays as profoundly related to it, albeit in a negative manner: as that which disrupted the equilibrium of the psyche, and indeed in its most physical dimensions as well (symptoms of light-headedness, dizziness being associated with anxiety attacks). Anxiety involved, both motorically, and psychically, a certain loss of control. And in the subsequently elaborated psychoanalytic discourse, the part or function of the psyche that sought to establish a certain control over warring factions was of course the I.

During the early phases of his writings on psychoanalysis, up until roughly the end of the First World War, Freud sought to integrate the phenomenon of anxiety into psychoanalytic conceptuality by describing it as an after-effect of repression, which, together with his reformulation of the notion of the "unconscious" was doubtless the most distinctive term associated with his work. Since repression was always construed as a dynamic process, one that involved not just the denial of a representation from consciousness, but its replacement by a "counter-charge" (Gegenbesetzung), and since therefore repression was constantly liable to modification through the conflict between that which was repressed (but also desired) and that which replaced it—for example, a phobia—there was always, Freud insisted, the possibility of the repressed "returning" in one form or another, of its gaining the upper hand—or threatening to do so—over that which was repressing it. Anxiety, in Freud's view, was to be construed as the response of the psyche, and in particular of the I, to this threat of a return of the repressed, which manifested itself "economically" through the release of energy that could not be bound to representations—that could not be channeled and objectified, "besetzt" as

Freud writes, whether through the formation of symptoms, of inhibitions, of phobias or through other means.

But as Freud accumulated experience, this rather simple explanation of anxiety, through which it was ostensibly subordinated directly to the pleasure principle—in his economic terminology, to the "binding" of energy, preparatory to its pleasurable release or discharge—proved itself to be increasingly untenable. The reason for this was apparent from the start, although Freud had sought to avoid its implications for the sake of his theory. The basic problem of anxiety—its "question"—was whether it designated a loss of control (of the I) or the effort to retain and regain control. Whether it was a means by which the I defended its integrity or a process by which it risked losing it. In short, whether the essence of anxiety could be seen in trauma and panic, or in the effort to control trauma and panic (questions posed at the outset of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with respect to the repetition of anxiety dreams, for instance).

Was anxiety then to be considered basically a salutary defense or a disruptive threat to the unity of the psyche, and thus first and foremost to that part or aspect of it that sought to establish and preserve such unity, the I?

It was this question that I believe in part at least informed one of the most influential and yet also peripheral essays he ever wrote: his 1919 study of "The Uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*). That the Uncanny is inseparable from anxiety is evident; what is more difficult is to determine precisely how it relates to it. Everything uncanny involves some sort of anxiety, but not all anxiety is per se uncanny. This is a pattern that Freud repeatedly evokes: B is a characteristic of A, but not all B is A, hence B does not suffice to explain A. Anxiety may involve the return of the repressed, but not every return of the repressed produces anxiety. Anxiety may involve free-floating energy, but not all free-floating energy results in anxiety, etc.

This essay of Freud's is curious for a variety of reasons. Not the least of these is to explain why, and how, he wrote it. Jones cites as a pragmatic reason the fact that it was written during the War, when it was difficult to get contributions for the *Imago,* and so Freud was asked to contribute something of his own to make up for the lack of foreign authors. But this hardly explains why he chose the Uncanny as his topic. Indeed, he does his best to muddy the traces when he insists that he is writing about something of which he has had very little personal experience. Jones by contrast informs us that he had begun writing this essay many years before, but that he had put off finishing it until he had passed the age of 62, the age at which his father died. In the essay Freud cites the number 62 as an example of an involuntary, and therefore uncanny recurrence, to which "one can even ascribe a secret significance, such as an indication of "the particular lifespan that is destined for him."[6]

Freud had always been particularly contemptuous of those who would ascribe to the fear of death any sort of fundamental significance. In *The I and the It,* again in the appendix from which we quoted earlier, on the "Dependencies of the I," he mocks the "bombastic proposition that all anxiety is at bottom fear of death." He argues that it is "virtually senseless" and in any case "unjustifiable." For "death" is "an abstract concept" to which nothing in the Unconscious corresponds. But Freud does come up with an interesting explanation for "the mechanism of the fear of death": "It can only be the fact that the I releases its narcissistic libido-charge to a large extent, which is to say, *gives itself up,* just as in other cases of anxiety it gives up another object." For Freud, then, the "fear of death" is situated "between I and Over-I" (288/60).

In other words, the fear of death, like anxiety in general—and in German it is the same word, *Angst,* that applies to both (which I have had to modify in English)—once again is situated not with respect to "death" per se, but with respect to the I: the fear of death is the fear that the I has of losing itself, abandoning its narcissistic libido, its ability to relate to itself as an erotic object. If the Unconscious can be thought independently of the "I," then the "fear of death"—Todesangst—can be considered to be epiphenomenal. But if—as we will argue—the Unconscious presupposes a degree of "I-ness," in however precocious and enigmatic a form, then the fear of "losing" that "I" would no longer be indifferent to the Unconscious. It would not have the form of the consciousness of an object, but rather of the expectation of the loss, not just of an object, but of that unifying instance before which all "objects" are inevitably situated: not the "subject" but rather the unity and consistency of the "I."

Anxiety, for Freud, is thus related to the experience of loss: loss of object, loss of the access to objects through perception, loss of the self qua I as object of self-consciousness. And yet, perhaps most of all, the form in which this anxiety is experienced as uncanny involves above all the sense of a loss of control. The example of the recurring number indicates—and this too is a recurrent motif in

Freud's discussion of anxiety, although it will also surface in his account of the repetition-compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—the anxiety that such recurrence evokes is related to the way they seem to occur *involuntarily*: they take place outside of the control, outside of the conscious volition and intention of the I.

It is this that allows them to be subsumed under the category that Freud invokes to define anxiety itself. Anxiety, he insists, is the reaction of the I to a "danger." A "danger" that can be fully external, or internal, coming from "It" or "Over-I." Anxiety thus seems on the one hand to occupy a borderline position between internal—I—and external, whether as real or as endopsychic. But if anxiety is a reaction to danger, not every reaction to danger produces anxiety. Anxiety must be further specified. It is a reaction to danger that produces an affect. The word is to be understood as literally as possible: it "af-fects" the I that it befalls from without. In anxiety the I feels that it is exposed to forces beyond its control. The ultimate fear is that the I will lose control fully, that it will be "overwhelmed" by external or by internal forces. As the example of the recurrent number, and many others suggest, those forces need not be embodied in agents: rather, they seem more related to a certain experience of time. Time can no longer be taken for granted as a medium of growth or self-fulfillment, of the accomplishment of conscious objectives: rather as "demonic repetition" it splits and derails such conscious intentionality.

This can be seen as the "danger" to which "anxiety" seeks to respond—and also Freud, in seeking to conceptualize anxiety as a "signal." This is the other side of anxiety: it is not merely a response to danger but an anticipation of it. It is not merely the beginning of a paralyzing panic, but functional and purposive. This other side—its "functional" side.

Freud has a difficult time deciding which of these two "sides" is the more important in anxiety, or indeed to what extent they can be separated. And yet they have radically distinct and indeed opposed ends. The one is to preserve the I as the agency of control and unification. The other is the recognition of a possible dissolution, abandon and loss. And in this recognition, or apprehension, there is already a certain complicity, a certain readiness of the I to accept the danger as inevitable and insurmountable. This is how Freud sums up this tendency at the end of *The I and the It*:

> We know that the fear of death makes its appearance under two conditions (which, moreover, are entirely analogous to situations in which other kinds of anxiety develop), namely, as a reaction to an external danger and as an internal process, as for instance in melancholia. […] The fear of death in melancholia only admits of one explanation: the I gives itself up because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the over-I. […] When the I finds itself in an excessive real danger which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it is bound to draw the same conclusion. It sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die. (61)

To be sure, Freud then draws from this insight a conclusion similar to the one he arrives at in his essay on "The Uncanny" and elsewhere: the fear of death, and anxiety in general, is "abstract" and epiphenomenal, merely "a development of the fear of castration" in which the I is confronted by the ambivalence of its desire. Anxiety would thus ultimately be a function of desire and of libidinal economy, and thus fully explicable in psychoanalytical terms.

It is to demonstrate the validity of this thesis that Freud ventures into marginal terrain in writing, or rather completing, his essay on "The Uncanny." It is an essay that begins with a kind of disavowal:

> The psychoanalyst feels seldom the impulse to undertake aesthetic investigations, not even then, when Aesthetics is not reduced to the theory of the Beautiful but is rather described as the theory of the qualities of our feelings. He [the Analyst] works on other levels of psychic life and has little to do with the goal-inhibited, muted emotional impulses that depend on so many concomitant constellations, which generally compose the matter of aesthetics. Now and then however it comes to pass [*trifft es sich doch*] that he must interest himself in a particular region of aesthetics, and this is that usually both marginal and neglected by the aesthetic scholarship.
>
> One such is the "Uncanny." […] (229)

Just why Freud—the analyst par excellence and author of these lines—has to leave the beaten tracks of psychoanalytic experience to venture out into the discipline of aesthetics, and not just the aesthetics of the beautiful but of feeling—an area largely neglected by aesthetic scholarship—he never gets around to really explaining. This lends a particular valence, retrospectively, to his formulation, that "now and then it comes to pass"—*es trifft sich doch*—a striking formulation, literally: "it meets or strikes itself nevertheless." What is this "it" that meets itself—*trifft sich*—or comes upon itself, or strikes itself? And that lures Freud along with it, to that *Treffen,* that meeting on a distant plain (or plane: *Schicht*)?

In a famous and often cited passage, Freud, who insists that he has long had no direct experience that could be called uncanny, and that he is therefore writing about a feeling that is far removed from his own recent experience—Freud describes the kind of meeting that marks the Uncanny, and he describes it as an autobiographical experience:

> As I once, on a hot summer afternoon, wandered through the unfamiliar, empty streets of a small town in Italy, I arrived in an area about whose character I could not long remain in doubt. There were only made-up women to be seen in the windows of the small houses and I hurried to leave the narrow street through the closest corner. But after I had wandered around for a while, I found myself suddenly back in the same street, in which I now began to arouse some attention and my precipitous exit had only the result that I returned via a different route for the third time. Then however I was seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny […] (249)

To discover one's way driven by a desire that escapes one's conscious control, which is therefore neither simply foreign nor simply familiar, is to discover the inseparability of desire and anxiety. The entire essay on "The Uncanny" is written in a somewhat similar manner. Its goal is never entirely clear, never entirely explicit, but it seems dedicated to bringing anxiety under the control of psychoanalytic discourse, as ultimately a "development" of "castration anxiety," and hence of what Lacan once called, rather loosely, the "dialectics of desire.". But at each new turn of the road something appears that prevents that control from stabilizing itself. And the rhythm of that appearance is not indifferent to its content: it is a rhythm of repetition, felt to be "demonic" because out of (self-conscious) control. And yet the desire involved is the desire for such control: what Freud calls the libidinal desire of the I to be an object of love; which is to say, to be an object of unification. It is this desire for unification that is undone at every twist and turn of the Uncanny trajectory, of the trajectory as itself uncanny.

Freud was compelled to write "The Uncanny," I submit, as a last-ditch effort to defend a theory that would have mapped Anxiety on to the scheme proposed by the pleasure principle, via repression. Here is how he himself sums up this intention:

> Here is now the place for two remarks in which I would like to depose the essential content of this little investigation. First, if psychoanalytical theory is correct in maintaining that every affective impulse, no matter of what kind, is transformed by repression into anxiety, then there must be a group among the cases producing anxiety in which it can be shown that this type of anxiety is something repressed returning. This type of anxiety would be the Uncanny, and therefore it is a matter of indifference whether it was originally anxious or of some other affect. Second, if this is really the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why linguistic usage has allowed the "canny"—literally the "homey"—to pass into its opposite, the uncanny, the "unhomey." For this Unhomey-uncanny is really nothing new or foreign, but rather something that has been familiar to psychic life from time immemorial (*vom alters her*), that has only been estranged from it through the process of repression. (254)

In short, in this account, psychoanalysis remains at home with the Uncanny, as it does with Anxiety, because both are to be integrated into—brought back home to—the psychic household or economy: the uncanny is a form of anxiety, and anxiety in general is still considered by Freud to be essentially a result of repression—and of its "return." The Uncanny is thus that form of anxiety in which what appeared to be strange reveals itself as familiar, without however losing its quality of strangeness—just as that which was repressed once had to be known, and remains known, but not to self-consciousness.

There is thus a split in the notion of the "familiar" and of the "known," which follows from the split within the notion of the recognition. Something strange is recognized as "familiar," but the precise nature of that familiarity remains hidden despite its being recognized as such. This split within the notion of recognition entails a split within the notion of cognition itself: to recognize the strange as familiar does not mean to cognize it, to understand it. Rather, such cognition is ambivalent because it preserves the unknowable in the knowable, and it is this that requires a "feeling"—anxiety—to be fully experienced. Experience here is affective rather than intellectual, in the usual sense of that word.

Another way of putting this is that repetition, which from the standpoint of ordinary self-consciousness is understood as a return of the same, is here revealed as a medium of alteration and of difference. What returns or is repeated is not simply one and the same. This is why it is not mere accident that at the time Freud is completing his essay on "The Uncanny," he is also on the verge of writing "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," which will be driven by the discovery of the "repetition compulsion." In the essay on the "Uncanny," a similar motif is manifested in the importance attached to phenomena of involuntary repetition or recurrence. The element of the "involuntary" in turn links the Uncanny not just to Repression as an economic or drive-dynamic phenomenon, but to the topographical instance of the "I." For it is the "I" that is the seat not just of anxiety, but also of the will—a phenomenon that Freud constantly collides with, without his ever being able to really theorize it.[7] It plays a decisive role in this essay in the form of its negation, the *involuntary.* And *involuntary repetition* in turn anticipates the "repetition compulsion" that shortly after this essay will lead Freud to the hypothesis of the death-drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

In short, Freud's essay on the Uncanny marks the borderline but also the turning-point between his earlier "economic" theory of anxiety based on repression, and his subsequent "second" theory of anxiety centered on the conceptual couple, "I" and "danger." This is also the strategy employed in "The Uncanny," where Freud seeks to integrate anxiety not just in terms of drive-economy or dynamics, but as an offshoot of "castration." But "castration" in turn has to be interpreted in terms of a shift in the function of the I: it is the crisis of a notion of the I as self-identical and "whole" to a conception of the "I" as heterogeneous and differential. In Lacanian terms, it is the crisis of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Castration thus becomes the model of that "loss" to which Freud from his earliest writings had always linked anxiety: the "loss of perception" thereby becoming the fear of losing one's eyes in the Hoffmann tale, and finally the fear of "castration"—which involves both a perceptual loss (the negative perception of the absence of the phallus) and an anticipated physical loss.[8]

The effort to define anxiety as a response of the I to danger, and in turn danger as the threat of a loss, presupposes an ideal of completeness that in the Freudian topography only the I can aspire to—but never attain. The consequence of this impossible aspiration is first the crisis of castration, and second, the concomitant the "decline of the Oedipus complex" and the rise of the Over-I, which takes the place of the aspiration to completeness, wholeness and if you will, "sovereignty." The Over-I is heir to the desire to be protected, to the fantasized omnipotence of parents and authorities, but its protection and power is ultimately inaccessible to the I, and worse, turns into a measure of its helplessness, its lack of sovereignty.

The I can no longer hope to consider itself "Herr im Hause"; it is like Kafka's "House-father" in the story that details the latter's "Care" ("Sorge des Housevaters": Cares of a House-father). It is no longer at home, or if you will, it is at home, but no longer controls what goes on there.

The borderline thus is not that which separates the home from the world outside, the inside from the outside, the familiar from the strange, but rather that which in traversing each renders them inseparable and yet irreconcilable.

To this situation at least two responses are conceivable (there are surely more, but I will limit myself here to just two, which are marked in Freud's writing). The first we have already discussed: it is the pure and simple self-abandonment of the I, which "gives itself up" and "lets itself die" as Freud puts it at the end of "The I and the It." But it is not difficult to see that such an abandon is not what it seems: it is not a pure and simple abandon: to give up, and to give oneself up is always to give oneself up to someone or something else. It is a last-ditch attempt to salvage a notion of the self as other, the Other writ large in Lacanian terms, to that Other which would possess the properties that the I has not been able to find in itself, namely a homogeneous, unified, sovereign Self that is ultimately independent, in contrast to the "dependencies of the I". That is the one solution, a kind of sacrificial sleight of hand through which the I, in giving itself up, seeks to save its ideal notion of self (what Lacan calls the "ideal of the I," which as imaginary he distinguishes from the symbolic I-Ideal).

But there is another solution, which however does not try to overcome the split, the heterogeneity, but rather simply, or not so simply, to maintain it, and in maintaining it, to alter its significance. For in being maintained, the split is no longer strictly a sign of a "loss," as with the loss of a perception or of an organ or even of one's life.

This is the solution that Freud retraces in his analyses of "Jokes," in which the ultimate joke, as I have tried to argue elsewhere[9] is the joke on meaning itself—or rather, not on meaning itself so much as on the expectation that language and what it represents will turn out to be meaningful. It is the function of this expectation in the joke-process as a whole that makes the shaggy dog story in many ways paradigmatic for jokes in general. But the shaggy dog story, as its name already implies, is not so much phallic—and thereby tied to castration—as it is "thallic", a word I introduced to describe the more feminine network or netting that presides over the telling of the joke:

> These jokes are not entirely untendentious, they are "shaggy-dog stories" and give the teller a certain pleasure by misleading and annoying the listener. The latter then mutes this annoyance by resolving to become a story-teller himself. (139)

The passage recalls Walter Benjamin's insistence, in his essay on the "Storyteller," that those who tell stories really actually retell them, and that those who listen in turn do the same, albeit differently. But we are now no longer in the closed space of the analytical session, but in the open space of social and historical tradition. The relation of I to Over-I will not thereby disappear, but it will leave room for others to take its place, however tentatively, just as it itself—the Over-I—is both more and less than a single I, being the repository as Freud insists of the specific traditions, both familial and cultural, which constitute the world of the I.

Benjamin emphasizes in his essay that the relation of audience to the storyteller is that of someone seeking "council" or "advice." That council or advice will always involve specific objects and problems. But beyond that, it will also inevitably involve, whether the I knows it or not—indeed whether the Unconscious knows it or not—its relation to that great other to which we give the name "death." The only answer of the storyteller is to tell another story, which will always be a more or less "tall" story—and invite the various "I"s gathered around to retell it in their fashion. Their stories will end, but the hope—the only hope perhaps—is that it will be continued, without effacing the borders, but also without reducing them to a simple interval.

(To be continued…)[10]

---

[1] This is a question that I have explored in two earlier books, above all *The Legend of Freud*, 2nd edition, Stanford UP: 2000. In this paper I take up the way in which the question of "anxiety" returns and compels Freud to make modifications to his theory that ultimately call its previous unity into question. Freud's move "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" is not merely a move toward the "death drive" and the "repetition compulsion," but also one that rediscovers anxiety as the familiar and yet irreducibly alien figure—the internal border so to speak—of psychoanalysis itself.

[2] As we will discuss further on, Freud's early thought also attaches great importance to a third perspective, the "economic." However, since this is based on a notion of "quantity" that ultimately homogenizes the energetic dimension of the psyche, it is less capable of articulating the conflicts that play a decisive role in the articulation of Freudian psychoanalysis. This is also why in his later work Freud moves "beyond the pleasure principle" and tends to stress the dynamic and topical at the expense of the "economic." We will see how this plays out concretely later in this paper when we retrace Freud's move from his "first," economic-based theory of anxiety, to his second, "topically" oriented theory, which reinterprets anxiety in terms of the functioning of the "I" rather than simply as a return of the "repressed."

[3] Although I cannot elaborate on this point here, I am suggesting that what takes the place of the philosophical-grammatical "subject" in Freud's discourse is on the one hand something he calls, in German (but the word exists in English as well), the "psyche," and on the other hand its relation to an "apparatus." Whatever else they may be, what he calls the "psychic apparatus" (psychisches Apparat) is very different from what is generally associated with the "subject," i.e. self-consciousness, autonomy, freedom, etc. An "apparatus" is a montage of functions that are irreducibly heterogeneous in both structure and genesis. In this respect, Freud's thinking is no less critical of the philosophical-grammatical notion of subjectivity than is Nietzsche's, to whom he knew his work to be profoundly related. The challenge in redefining what takes the place of the subject in Freud's thought is to work out the relation between his second topography, and above all, that of the "I," to the notion of a "psychic apparatus." But in that process notions of "subjectivity" will have at best a negative role to play.

[4] In his essay on the Uncanny, which will be discussed later on in this essay, Freud rejects the theory of his sole predecessor, Jentsch, that the Uncanny is the result of "intellectual uncertainty." But if Freud rejects this theory, it is because Jentsch's notion of "uncertainty" is not uncertain enough for him, since it applies only to the correspondence of a representation to its object, but not to the structure of representation, and thus to that of consciousness as such. Jentsch thus argues that it is the uncertainty concerning the status of Olimpia that produces the Uncanny and the anxiety associated with it, whereas for Freud the Uncanny calls the unitary structure of itself into question. Formulated differently, the Uncanny and the anxiety associated with it are not simply ambiguous, but ambivalent: the "familiar" (*heimlich*) acts as though it were unfamiliar. This coexistence of properties that would normally be considered oppositional, i.e. mutually exclusive, is what seems to characterize the Unconscious. Consciousness is uncertain not about this or that property of its object, but about its unity as such – and hence its status qua ob-ject. This ambivalent,

---

disunifying dimension of the Uncanny is what will tie it inextricably to anxiety, but in a way that, I will argue, both informs and disrupts the unity of the Freudian "system."

[5] S. Freud, *Das Ich und das Es* (my translation), GW XIII, 286; *The Ego and the Id* (Norton Edition), 58-59.

[6] S. Freud, "*Das Unheimliche,*" GW XII, 250.

[7] "The influence of the will on pathological processes of the body is less easy to document through examples, but it is entirely possible that the predisposition (Vorsatz) to become healthy, ort he will to die, is not without significance for the conclusion of even the most serious and difficult illnesses." GW V, 297 (my translation—SW).

[8] The reader may want to consult my earlier discussion of "castration" as the process by which a certain form of story-telling seeks to alleviate the anxiety provoked by the sense of "loss": *The Legend of Freud,* op. cit, 55-56.

[9] Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, 2nd edition, pp. 101-156.

[10] One particularly marked instance of this dimension of storytelling, in a written text, is to be found in a tale of E. Th.A. Hoffmann, author of *The Sandman,* but also of *The Stories of Kater Murr*: stories told not by a human, but by a cat named "Murr." Each story ends with a phrase that links it to the next: "Murr fährt fort," which is only weakly translated as "Murr continues." Why weakly? Because "fort" in German means "continues" but also "gone" – as in the famous "fort/da" game discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* As Derrida says somewhere, the "da" is the "fort" – and the "fort" is also *da:* "there," but also "then…" (On the "da" as "then" see: S. Weber, "Das Wiederholbare," in: G. Neumann, A. Haverkamp, *Post-Strukturalismus,* Fink-Verlag, Stuttgart ….)