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UNCANNY KENNINGS

Provocation and Fugue on the Anasemic *Unheimliche*

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Signature uncanny. The signature: uncanny. Signature: the uncanny. Straining my ears, I listen to these phrasings, for the music in them, so as to discern which strikes the best-resounding overture to the little *récit* I am about to offer.

Uncanny: the signature. This little *récit* is about the uncanniness of being signed by the uncanny. It is about the uncanniness of being signed by a *signature uncanny* that made my name its own, made itself heard wherever my name could be heard, countersigned all that I wished to say about the uncanny in my name. The signature uncanny: like a footballer's signature move, a radio programme's signature tune, a coffee roaster's signature blend, it would be an uncanny *by which some singular thing is known*. As if the uncanny were one of those composers, like Johann Sebastian Bach or Dmitri Shostakovich, who transformed their names into musical cryptograms that anyone might use, weaving a BACH or DSCH motif into their own works in an act of reciprocal exappropriation: to compose with them is to compose *in the name of the other*, to carve into one's own signature the signature of the other.

Composed by the uncanny. Or, more precisely, by *das Unheimliche*. For it happened one day last spring that I began to hear the latter in my name: the first four phonemes of the German –

u, n, h, a – slipped into it as into four voice-pockets, where, once uncocooned, they began their concerted rustling, as if to have it whisper with this nameless promise or threat: *where you were, there shall we be*. A tale of two signatures: uttering my name, I heard it being decomposed by the *UNHA motif* – and recomposed by the uncanny.

Two other things happened that day which further provoked the motif. The first was that I went on formulating the hypothesis that *das Unheimliche*, like pleasure, id, and ego, might be read as an instance of what Nicolas Abraham calls *anasemia*, an uncoupling of word and meaning which Jacques Derrida glosses as follows: ‘Within the same linguistic system, the same word, “pleasure” for example, can be translated into itself and, without really “changing” its meaning, can pass into another language, the same one, where however the alteration will have been total’¹. A not unlikely hypothesis, it found support in the curious circumstance that this anasemic translation occurs in the *culling* and *kenning*² that Freud’s essay itself enacts: drawing a long excerpt from Sanders’s *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*, Freud culls from this culled excerpt Schelling’s definition of *unheimlich* as ‘*the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light*’ (U1: 224), which culled definition he then uses as a kenning (from the Old Norse *kenna við*, ‘to name after’) for something whose ‘unknown nature’ (U1: 220) he is trying to infer – or, to hew closer to Abraham, for the ‘nonpresence’ which at once *gives rise to* and *is translated by* the sensation of the uncanny³. Here, I thought, the *ana* would be the culling and the kenning the *semia*, giving rise to all kinds of verbal configurations I felt were too embarrassing to be mouthed.

The other thing was that I continued working on my translation of M. R. James’s ‘Casting the Runes’, one of only three among James’s antiquary ghost stories in which use is made of the adjective ‘uncanny’. Here, this use concerns a slip of paper, marked in red and black with runic letters that spell mortal danger for the hapless protagonist, a certain Mr.

Dunning, who, as member of a learned society, has had the misfortune of rejecting a proposed paper by a Mr. Karswell on the inauspicious topic of *The Truth of Alchemy*. Misfortune, because, as Dunning is made aware by a strange advertisement of Karswell's devising, the man who previously had stunted his academic ambitions had not come to a pleasant end. 'In memory', the advertisement reads, 'of John Harrington, F.S.A., of the Laurels, Ashbrooke. Died Sept. 18th, 1889. *Three months were allowed*'⁴. This is how James narrates Dunning's discovery of the fateful slip of paper: 'Dunning's portfolio of papers was gathering dust on the writing-table. In it were the quires of small-sized scribbling paper which he used for his transcripts: and from one of these, as he took it up, there slipped and fluttered out into the room with uncanny quickness, a strip of thin light paper' (159). And this is how the slip comes into Dunning's unwitting possession: visiting the British Museum to examine some volumes of heraldry, Dunning suddenly 'thought he heard his own name whispered behind him. He turned round hastily, and in doing so, brushed his little portfolio of loose papers on to the floor'. Which is when 'a stout gentleman at the table behind him [...] touched him on the shoulder, saying, "May I give you this? I think it should be yours," and handed him a missing quire. "It is mine, thank you," said Mr. Dunning' (153).

At this point the UNHA motif spun into a delirious fugue. May I give you this, *das Unheimliche* said to me, I think it should be yours – and handed me my name, anasemically translated into naming not me but the nonpresence in me. And with a whisper there slipped and fluttered out into the room with uncanny quickness a flock of suggestions from Freud, themselves runes of a sort, which insisted upon my identification of myself with Dunning and of Karswell with *das Unheimliche*. There was, between mine and Dunning's name, the phonetic identity of the *ann*, which aroused the telepathic feeling that the whispering of Dunning's name was the whispering of mine (U1: 234); there was the effacement of the distinction between imagination and reality (U1: 244); and there was, most frightfully of all,

the prospect of a gruesome end made more than gruesome by its coming at the hands of an unearthly creature invoked by the runes, of which all that is said is said in some lines from Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' – lines, James glosses, 'about one who, having once looked round –

– *walks on,*

And turns no more his head

Because he knows a frightful fiend

doth close behind him tread.' (160)

Yet Dunning, I felt then, was the more fortunate of us. This was because, in order to avert this outcome, all he needed to do, within the three months that were allowed him, was to return the slip of paper to its author and cast the runes back at him. A dangerous yet achievable task. But no such anabolic escape was available to me. For how can one *untranslate* a name, itself untranslatable, that has been anasemically translated by the anasemic uncanny? How could one – how could *I* – tease the voice-slips out of their pockets and seam up my name so as to mute their phantom harangue? How could I, forehounded by my name, cast off that runic motif? Nowhere had I felt more pressingly the irreversibility of translation, nowhere more acutely the truth of its uncanny alchemy. What was uncanny was that the untranslatable name translates: myself into myself. And what the name itself translated was the uncanniness, the uncanny anasemia, of translation: whether of myself into myself, of a language into itself, of one language into the other, translation is always the translation of a nonpresence by a language and of a language by a nonpresence, in other words the translation of a known into the unknown by the unknowable, as if the *anakenning* unknowable were whispering to the *cullosemic* known: where you were, there shall I –

Here the *récit* had to be cut off; ten minutes, not three months, were allowed. Yet in the silence that had fallen the fugue still rang. Composed by the uncanny in my name, by the *signature uncanny* that rendered unknown what my name might name, in other words by the uncanny kenning which doubles the act of naming with one of unnamings, there would be no seizing its *Kunst der unnahbare Fuge*. Quite as Derrida says in his two fugitive notes on ‘The “Uncanny”’ in ‘The Double Session’:

(To be continued)⁵

¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Me–Psychoanalysis’, translated by Richard Klein, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2007), 134.

² See Walter J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1977), 261–262.

³ See Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, edited and translated by Nicholas Rand (Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 85.

⁴ M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, edited by Darryl Jones (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 150, my emphasis. Further references in text.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 220n32, 268n67.