INTRODUCTION

The Weird and the Eerie (Beyond the Unheimlich)

It is odd that it has taken me so long to really reckon with the weird and the eerie. For although the immediate origins of this book lay in fairly recent events, I have been fascinated and haunted by examples of the weird and the eerie for as long as I can remember. Yet I had not really identified the two modes, still less specified their defining features. No doubt this is partly because the major cultural examples of the weird and the eerie are to be found at the edges of genres such as horror and science fiction, and these genre associations have obscured what is specific to the weird and the eerie.

The weird came into focus for me around a decade ago, as the result of two symposia on the work of H.P. Lovecraft at Goldsmiths, University of London; while the eerie became the major subject of *On Vanishing Land*, the 2013 audio-essay I produced in collaboration with Justin Barton. Appropriately, the eerie crept up on Justin and me; it had not been our original focus, but by the end of the project we found that much of the music, film and fiction that had always haunted us possessed the quality of the eerie.

What the weird and the eerie have in common is a preoccupation with the strange. The strange — not the horrific. The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us". It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread — but it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying. I am not here claiming that the outside is always beneficent. There are more than

enough terrors to be found there; but such terrors are not all there is to the outside.

Perhaps my delay in coming round to the weird and the eerie had to do with the spell cast by Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*. As is well known, the *unheimlich* has been inadequately translated into English as the uncanny; the word which better captures Freud's sense of the term is the "unhomely". The *unheimlich* is often equated with the weird and the eerie — Freud's own essay treats the terms as interchangeable. But the influence of Freud's great essay has meant that the *unheimlich* has crowded out the other two modes.

The essay on the *unheimlich* has been highly influential on the study of horror and science fiction — perhaps, in the end, more because of Freud's hesitations, conjectures and rejected theses than for the actual definition he provides. The examples of the *unheimlich* which Freud furnishes — doubles, mechanical entities that appear human, prostheses — call up a certain kind of disquiet. But Freud's ultimate settling of the enigma of the *unheimlich* — his claim that it can be reduced to castration anxiety — is as disappointing as any mediocre genre detective's rote solution to a mystery. What enduringly fascinates is the cluster of concepts that circulate in Freud's essay, and the way in which they often recursively instantiate the very processes to which they refer. *Repetition* and *doubling* — themselves an uncanny pair which double and repeat each other — seem to be at the heart of every "uncanny" phenomena which Freud identifies.

There is certainly something that the weird, the eerie and the *unheimlich* share. They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being. Even so, they are not quite genres.

Perhaps the most important difference between the *unheimlich* on the one hand and the weird and the eerie on the other is their treatment of the strange. Freud's *unheimlich* is about the strange *within* the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange — about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself. All of the ambivalences of Freud's psychoanalysis are caught up in this concept. Is it about making the familiar — and the familial

— strange? Or is it about returning the strange to the familiar, the familial? Here we can appreciate the double move inherent to Freudian psychoanalysis: first of all, there is estrangement of many of the common notions about the family; but this is accompanied by a compensatory move, whereby the outside becomes legible in terms of a modernist family drama. Psychoanalysis itself is an *unheimlich* genre; it is haunted by an outside which it circles around but can never fully acknowledge or affirm. Many commentators have recognised that the essay on the *unheimlich* itself resembles a tale, with Freud in the role of the Jamesian unreliable narrator. If Freud is an unreliable narrator, why should we accept that his own tale should be classified in terms of the category that his essay proposes? What if, instead, the whole drama of the essay consisted in Freud's attempts continually to contain the phenomena he explores within the remit of the *unheimlich*?

The folding of the weird and the eerie into the *unheimlich* is symptomatic of a secular retreat from the outside. The wider predilection for the *unheimlich* is commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside. The weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside. As we shall see, the weird is that *which does not belong*. The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the "homely" (even as its negation). The form that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage — the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together.* Hence the predilection within surrealism for the weird, which understood the unconscious as a montage-machine, a generator of weird juxtapositions. Hence also the reason that Jacques Lacan — rising to the challenge posed by surrealism and the rest of aesthetic modernism — could move towards a *weird psychoanalysis*, in which the death drive, dreams and the unconscious become untethered from any naturalisation or sense of homeliness.

At first glance, the eerie might seem to be closer to the *unheimlich* than to the weird. Yet, like the weird, the eerie is also fundamentally

to do with the outside, and here we can understand the outside in a straightforwardly empirical as well as a more abstract transcendental sense. A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? What kind of thing was it that emitted such an *eerie cry*? As we can see from these examples, the eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? These questions can be posed in a psychoanalytic register — if we are not who we think we are, what are we? — but they also apply to the forces governing capitalist society. Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity.

The metaphysical scandal of capital brings us to the broader question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate: the agency of minerals and landscape for authors like Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner, and the way that "we" "ourselves" are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces. There is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was. The shudder here is the shudder of the eerie, not of the *unheimlich*.

One extraordinary example of the displacement of the *unheimlich* by the eerie is D.M. Thomas' novel *The White Hotel*. The novel first of all seems to be about a simulated case study of a fictional patient of Freud's, "Anna G". The poem by Anna G which begins the novel seems at first sight to be saturated with erotic hysteria, as Thomas' Freud proposes in the Case History which he writes. Freud's reading threatens to dissipate the oneiric atmosphere of Anna G's poem, and also establish to a direction of explanation: from the present to the past, from the outside to the inside. Yet it turns out that the seeming eroticism is itself an obfuscation and a deflection from the poem's most intense referent, which is to be found not in Anna G's past, but in her future — her death at the massacre at Babi Yar in 1941. The problems of foresight and fate here bring us to the eerie in a

disturbing form. Yet fate might be said to belong to the weird as well as the eerie. The soothsaying witches in *Macbeth*, after all, are known as the Weird Sisters, and one of the archaic meanings of "weird" is "fate". The concept of fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception, but it is also eerie in that it raises questions about agency: who or what is the entity that has woven fate?

The eerie concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: *Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?* The unseeing eyes of the dead; the bewildered eyes of an amnesiac — these provoke a sense of the eerie, just as surely as an abandoned village or a stone circle do.

So far, we are still left with the impression that the weird and the eerie have primarily to do with what is distressing or terrifying. So let us end these preliminary remarks by pointing to examples of the weird and the eerie that produce a different set of affects. Modernist and experimental work often strikes us as weird when we first encounter it. The sense of *wrongness* associated with the weird — the conviction that *this does not belong* — is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new. The weird here is a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete. If the encounter with the strange here is not straightforwardly pleasurable (the pleasurable would always refer to previous forms of satisfaction), it is not simply unpleasant either: there is an enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded — an enjoyment which, in its mixture of pleasure and pain, has something in common with what Lacan called *jouissance*.

The eerie also entails a disengagement from our current attachments. But, with the eerie, this disengagement does not usually have the quality of shock that is typically a feature of the weird. The serenity that is often associated with the eerie — think of the phrase *eerie calm* — has to do with detachment from the urgencies of the everyday. The perspective of the eerie can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it can give us access to spaces beyond

mundane reality altogether. It is this release from the mundane, this escape from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality, which goes some way to account for the peculiar appeal that the eerie possesses.

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