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Second Nature

Ulrika Maude

The opening pages of Freud's 'The Uncanny' focus on those aesthetic experiences that part company with 'feelings of a positive nature' and induce instead sensations of 'repulsion and distress' (U1: 219). Freud owes the realisation of this variety of experience to Ernst Jentsch, a doctor and psychologist, who in his essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906), is less interested in what constitutes the uncanny than in the 'psychical processes' that generate its impression.¹ Jentsch dedicates substantial attention to '*doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate*'; he goes on to specify that 'this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness'.² Jentsch then turns his focus to literature and professes a particular fascination with those instances in which it is unclear whether the reader '*has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character*'.³ He goes on to highlight real-life instances of 'people who are delirious, intoxicated, ecstatic', but he also mentions sufferers of epilepsy and the more 'limited alienating effect' of the hysterical attack.⁴ In this, he is drawing on a major turn-of-the-century preoccupation with automatism, also registered, most strikingly perhaps, in the work of Henri Bergson, who expresses a deep concern with the body as 'matter' that has a tendency to ossify and become rigid, and that perpetually threatens to thwart the animating impulses of spirit. As Jentsch seems to acknowledge, and as Freud himself will have known from his days as a student at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris in 1885, automatisms are also a major preoccupation of nineteenth-century neurology, and particularly of the work of Jean-Martin Charcot, who studied 'hysterico-epilepsy' and Parkinson's disease, and saw free will as a 'metaphysical' invention.⁵

Writing about the uncanny in 1919, Freud returns to these notions. Referring to Jentsch's preoccupation with 'epileptic fits' and 'insanity', he elaborates, while not fully accepting Jentsch's view, that 'these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work

behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity' (U1: 226). But I want here to focus on a more quotidian and concealed form of automatism, for Freud also twice refers to the German Romantic philosopher, Friedrich Schelling, who writes that "*The Unheimlich*" is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light' (U1: 224).

As both Jentsch and Freud acknowledge, the uncanny makes a particularly striking appearance in works of literature. One such example is James Joyce's high-modernist novel, *Ulysses* (1922), a book about the homely or *heimlich*, about ordinary or everyday events, but one in which the *Unheimlich* also makes regular and arresting appearances. In the 'Calypso' episode, for instance, Leopold Bloom sets off to purchase a kidney for breakfast. As he leaves the house, 'His hand took his hat from the peg over his initialled heavy overcoat'.⁶ What is notable in Joyce's prose is that the subject of the sentence is not Bloom himself, but his hand, which seems to perform the action independently – one might say automatically – without engaging Bloom's intentional mind.⁷ When Bloom returns from the butcher's, where 'His hand accepted the moist tender gland', he fries the kidney, eats it with relish, prepares breakfast for his wife, and, on his way to the outhouse suddenly remembers his hat: 'Where is my hat, by the way? Must have put it back on the peg. Or hanging up on the floor. Funny, I don't remember that'.⁸ In describing this strange, 'funny' feeling of a habitual action performed without conscious intention or knowledge, Joyce draws attention to a prominent, hidden aspect of the everyday: the manner in which the body initiates and performs habitual actions without the engagement of the conscious mind.

In T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, another high-modernist text also published in 1922, the typist who makes an appearance in Section III ('The Fire Sermon') has a sordid sexual encounter with 'the young man carbuncular'. Afterwards, we learn,

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair with automatic hand

And puts a record on the gramophone.⁹

Thinking, in Eliot’s poem, is represented as ‘half-formed’ (l. 251), and as governed by another physiological organ, the brain, while the actions of the typist are presented in a hostile and coldly mechanical manner, embodied in her ‘automatic hand’ – something that is also implied by her profession (l. 255).¹⁰ What both of these examples stage is a familiar variety of automatic action – what we call habit – which presents a challenge to received understandings of what it is to be human because it seems to entail an absence of reflection, intentionality and agency, to constitute an alienation from the self, and to involve a form of automatism. In their emphasis on these everyday actions, Joyce and Eliot bring something ‘*secret and hidden*’ to light: the uncanny self-alienation of automaticity that is involved in habits.

The noun ‘habit’ comes to the English language from the Old French, ‘habit’ or ‘abit’, which in turn originates in the Latin noun ‘habitus’, from the verb ‘habere’, to have – or in its reflexive form, ‘to be constituted; to be’. The noun therefore seems to suggest that habits contain something essential to subjective experience – to suggest, even, that *habits are what we are*. In his extended essay, *Of Habit* (1838), Félix Ravaisson’s analysis seems to accord with this etymology. Ravaisson divides habits into two main groups: firstly, there are habits that originate in an intentional act, such as learning to play a musical instrument or to speak a foreign language, to practise certain sports or to dance – actions to which we dedicate attention and effort. Secondly, there are habits that originate in ‘passivity’, in which the organism is bombarded by stimuli, to which it habituates itself and then begins to crave. Devoid of intentionality, this second kind of habit constitutes an

addiction.¹¹ Ravaissou's thinking radically departs from the philosophical understanding of habit as 'an obstacle to knowledge', in that it results in ease, facility and power, and can even produce exceptional physical elegance, beauty and style;¹² but he also conceives of habit in terms of the machinic and, at times, in terms of pathological repetition, for habit is characterised by '[i]nflammations, spasms, convulsions', which make 'regular appearances' without any 'determining cause in the material of the organism'.¹³ Drawing substantially on medical textbooks of his time, Ravaissou proposes that chronic illness is a habit. He argues that a fever that by chance has occurred regularly 'tends to convert itself into periodic affection' such that 'the periodicity becomes essential to it'.¹⁴

For Ravaissou, however, an intentional habit is formed as 'an idea that gradually naturalizes, an action that, as a result of repetition, imperceptibly moves from the understanding and the will to nature'.¹⁵ What originates in conscious effort becomes, paradoxically and by insensible degree, second nature. Habit, in this analysis, bridges the gap between will or consciousness on the one hand and the matter and automated functions of the body on the other; habit forms a complex ontology to which virtually everything integral to the subject can be traced. Ravaissou argues that 'Habit is an acquired nature, a second nature that has its ultimate ground in primitive nature': becoming second nature, habit replaces instinctual behaviour, which in humans is all-but lost.¹⁶ As Joyce and Eliot suggest, habit brings something critical but concealed to light: our habits unveil the always-already mechanical nature of the self. In habit, we discover the uncanny within.

Notes

¹ Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)', trans. Roy Sellers, *Angelaki* 2:1 (2008), p.8.

² Jentsch, p.11.

³ Jentsch, p.13.

⁴ Jentsch pp.13-14.

⁵ See Ruth Harris, 'Introduction' in Jean-Martin Charcot, *Clinical Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System*, ed. Ruth Harris (London: Routledge, 1991), ix-lxviii (p. xvii).

⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p.55.

⁷ Derek Attridge draws attention to this aspect of Joyce's writing in *Peculiar Language* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.158-72.

⁸ Joyce, pp.58, 66.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume I*, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London, Faber, 2015), ll.249-56; pp.53-77 (p.64).

¹⁰ For a sustained discussion of the typist's hand, and of the gramophone, see Lawrence Rainey, 'Modernism and Popular Culture', *The Bloomsbury Companion to Modernist Literature*, eds. Ulrika Maude and Mark Nixon (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): pp.171-91 (pp.185-87).

¹¹ Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹² Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair, 'Editor's Introduction', *Of Habit*, pp.1-21 (p. 16).

¹³ Ravaisson, p.35.

¹⁴ Ravaisson, p.35.

¹⁵ Leandro M. Gaitán and Javier S. Castresana, 'On Habit and the Mind-Body Problem: The View of Félix Ravaisson', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8 (2014): pp.1-3 (p. 1).

¹⁶ Ravaisson, p.59.