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The Abject, the Uncanny, and the Sublime:
A Destabilization of Boundaries

There is a certain sense of deep interconnection amongst the concepts of the abject, the uncanny, and the sublime. All seem to be hinged upon the idea of the boundary and a blurring, destruction, or destabilization of the categories it creates. Boundaries serve to separate entities, rendering them unique and distinguishable. Confusion and fear result when boundaries are made obsolete and entities begin to blur together. It is in this state where the crossroads of the abject, uncanny, and sublime can be found. There is an unsettling discomfort and a sensing of something greater than oneself, which Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, and Immanuel Kant all explore in different but extremely interrelated ways. The abject, uncanny, and sublime are not descriptive of the same phenomena, but they are, however, highly related, and many of the ways in which they relate are connected to the creation and destruction of boundaries and an existence within the realm of paradox.

For Kristeva, this feeling of fear and unease is encapsulated in abjection. In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, she claims that the abject exists on the edges, defining the self by creating a boundary between the ego and the non-ego. Our horror and repulsion of the abject is a source of protection to maintain this boundary. At the level of the physical body, our skin is the border that separates us from the outside world. Each being then engages in a constant process of ingesting into the body and secreting (or abjecting) from the body in order to live. We incorporate food into our being and expel excrement, discarding it as non-being. Here, we see the first of the many paradoxes that are critical to the comprehension of the abject, uncanny, and sublime. When we ingest, we incorporate food as part of our being. By excreting it later, we are both preserving the self by rejecting the non-self and also rejecting what was previously accepted

as the self. "[S]ince the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva 3). The release of bodily fluids—vomit, tears, excrement—is a protection and preservation of the self but it is also an ejection of the self, which Kristeva equates to giving birth. On one hand, it is a separating and a rejecting of those things which are the other, the toxic, the non-ego. But on the other hand, we can only excrete the self, since we must have ingested and incorporated the thing being excreted as the self before excreting it.

To *abject* literally means to *cast out*, which connects to the word made infamous by Freud: *castration*, meaning to remove, deprive of, or *abject* a part of the body. Castration is a violation of the body and thus the ego, the self. Kristeva writes, "Significance is indeed inherent in the human body" (10). This sentiment helps to explain the sense of connection we feel between our physical and mental worlds. The body is made significant by the being that inhabits it, and the two become one and the same in the ego. This significance and knowledge of the self is an important concept for Kristeva, as it creates an extremely important boundary—one that separates the ego from the non-ego, the inside from the outside. But, paradoxically, it also dissolves a boundary between the mental and physical self.

Castration and the violating of the boundary of the physical body is tied heavily, for Freud, to the concept of uncanniness. In his essay *The Uncanny*, he writes: "Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, [...] all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when [...] they prove capable of independent activity in addition.

As we already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its proximity to the castration complex" (Freud 946). Perhaps castration can also be called the "abjection of what is still the self." The resulting uncanniness or uneasiness is founded, once again, in the blurring of boundaries. There are good and necessary processes of abjection—ingestion and secretion—which sustain life and form the self and non-self. But castration is an unnecessary abjection of the self, directly and prematurely turning the self into the non-self. This boundary is especially complicated if, as Freud writes, the castrated body part "proves capable of independent activity." This further animates the castrated part, making it even more difficult to determine what is living and what is non-living, what is a part of the self and what is not.

Freud's concept of the uncanny is also heavily connected to the idea of familiarity. Familiarity as a source of fear and discomfort can be seen in his castration example because what is more familiar to us than our own body? If parts of our or anyone's body are severed—parts of a body which we formerly recognized as a whole—we experience a deep sense of uncanniness. Freud defines the uncanny as something which feels familiar but in an unnerving sense. It is something repressed and accidentally uncovered. Freud attempts to unpack the complexity of the German equivalent of this word (*unheimlich*) by comparing it to its root word (*heimlich*). *Heimlich* literally means "homely" or "relating to the home." This can connote comfort, intimacy, and familiarity, but it can also imply secrecy, concealment (within the home and family), and something kept away from strangers. The noun form (*das Geheimnis*) translates to the English word "secret." *Unheimlich*, however, as Freud is careful to point out to his readers, does not necessarily mean the opposite of *heimlich*. *Unheimlich* refers to the unfamiliar or gruesome, which, according to Freud, result from either the uncovering of repressed infantile complexes or the proof of previously surmounted primitive beliefs. But since the feeling is

founded in an uncovering of previously surmounted drives or thoughts, *unheimlich* really refers to the familiar (but the unexplainably familiar, the eerily familiar). So the meanings of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are in many ways one and the same. "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (Freud 934). The relation of *heimlich* to *unheimlich* is quite complex, and the two seem to be simultaneous antonyms and synonyms. By following the trail of the definitions of both seemingly dichotomous words, we arrive at a common ground. Even at the level of the root words themselves, the idea of the uncanny is founded upon blurred boundaries and paradox.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes of the uncanny in relation to the abject. She claims that the uncanny is recognizable, but it is not the ego. It is familiar, but it is not recognized as a part of the self. It is, therefore, the non-ego, the other. She distinguishes abjection from the concept of the uncanny in writing: "Essentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva 5). Here she is claiming that uncanniness is founded upon a sense of familiarity and abjection upon a sense of the loss of familiarity, both resulting in the arousal of horror. However, there is more at play here than a simple opposition between the uncanny and the abject. There is an echoed blurring of lines that creates feelings of uneasiness. The uncanny is something which feels familiar but for an unexplained reason. It is familiar but should not feel familiar. The abject is something which feels foreign, also for an unexplained reason. It should feel stable and familiar, yet it feels foreign. Again, we have blurred boundaries, resulting in paradox. (It is also interesting to note Kristeva's assertion that the abject is more violent than the uncanny, especially shortly after investigating Freud's reference to

severed limbs. Perhaps her use of the word "violent" is more figurative than literal and is in reference to the ripping apart of the self and non-self which characterizes abjection.)

The sense of (un)familiarity inherent in the definitions of the abject and the uncanny is connected—both for Freud and Kristeva—to the self, since it is the self with which we are most familiar. The most important boundary of all is the one separating ourselves from the outside world—the self from the non-self—because it is this boundary which establishes at the deepest level what should and should not be familiar. We experience uncanniness or horror when what is outside of this boundary is familiar and what is inside this boundary is foreign, thus rendering the boundary obsolete. In fact, according to Kristeva, our lives are founded and maintained on a process of abjection in an attempt to keep this boundary intact. This process, as mentioned earlier, encompasses the ingestion and secretion of material substances, but it also includes the rejection of thoughts or ideas that seem to threaten the ego and thus the boundary of self. Our lives are formed in a constant state of abjection and self-maintenance.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva asserts that we give birth to the self by rejecting what is not the self. Thus, we construct boundaries of the ego and abject the non-ego. The self is founded in loss and abjection. In fact, the process of giving birth to life is actually the abjection, or casting out, of one body from another. Kristeva describes birth as "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10). Every being is brought into the world through a kind of castration of another being. We are created on a rejection of the want (the sexual act) which created us. This want is what initially produces life (or, more technically, a bodily extension of an existing life), and the abjection of that new part of the body is what ultimately creates the new life and brings it into the world. The resulting being will be plagued by the repression of its own desires because it was, after all, the result of the

rejection—or abjection—of a desire and a part of the self. Kristeva writes, "The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). The abjection of the self in order to maintain the self (through the excretion of bodily fluids or the rejection of ego-threatening thoughts, drives, and desires) can, according to Kristeva, be traced to the abjection upon which selfhood is formed.

Death is then, for Kristeva, the ultimate abjection. A corpse is made when the self abjects its entirety. Death is a shift from living to non-living, from ego to non-ego, from being to object. The horror experienced as a result of seeing a corpse is the product of the blurring of the lines between life and death which is encapsulated in that corpse. "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (Kristeva 3). The border becomes an object in the corpse, which itself becomes borderless as death infects life.

Freud also relates the feeling of the uncanny to birth and death, the creation and destruction of life, the negotiation of the ultimate boundary. The platform of birth and death is one which lends itself easily to a comparison of abjection and uncanniness because both Kristeva and Freud point to these instances as the origination of their respective topics. Freud writes, "Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (944). This claim is reminiscent of the earlier citation of Freud's reference to castration and the severing of body parts. Seeing the physical body (in part or in whole) as divorced from life is a horrific

experience because it is such a confusing one. Life becomes non-life, animate becomes inanimate. The boundary is shifted or abolished, leaving us with ambiguity and the unknown.

Freud goes on in *The Uncanny* to explain a critical link between birth and death, which helps to explicate the root of the uncanny feelings associated with both:

> To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psycho-analysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy [sic] is only a transformation of another phantasy [sic] which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness—the phantasy [sic], I mean, of intra-uterine existence. (Freud 946)

The fear of being buried alive can be considered the ultimate uncanniness for many reasons. Firstly, it is a blurring of the lines of animate and inanimate, which Freud explains is the cause of many instances of the uncanny. The animate human body is in the place of eternal rest for the inanimate corpse. Secondly, being trapped in a coffin is an encapsulation of the fears of silence, solitude, and darkness—the infantile fears, according to Freud, from which most of us have never and will never escape. A return to this womblike state, alone in silence and darkness, is the ultimate human fear. And thirdly, this idea of repetition and a return to the familiar echoed in the return to the uterus is thus the ultimate uncanniness because it is the return to the most original familiar.

The dysfunctional duality of the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* is reflected in the paradox of the fear of returning to the familiar—the womb, the earth, solitude. The image of being buried alive or of returning to the womb is a perfect metaphor for the complexity and paradoxical nature of the word "uncanny." Again, there is an echoed blurring of boundaries at the level of linguistics and at the level of meaning, both for Freud and Kristeva. Ambiguities arise surrounding death: animate/inanimate, living/non-living, fantasy/reality. These ambiguities ultimately result in fear and horror for both Kristeva and abjection and Freud and the uncanny.

Just as Freud claims that the ultimate uncanniness relates to death, so does Kristeva relate the ultimate source of horror to death. This is especially true, she claims, when it interferes with what is believed to be able to save the self. For example, the death of a child is particularly horrible because we think of childhood as pure and untouchable by the reality of world. When death infects the life of one whom we believe to be invincible, the sense of horror is all the more potent. The blurring of the boundaries of right and wrong, life and death, certainty and uncertainty thrust us into the realm of abjection and the uncanny.

Death brings about yet another similarity between the abject and the uncanny: doubling. The body which was once full of life is now drained of that life, and there is a certain feeling of detachment from and yet familiarity with this new object. The familiarity is rooted in the concept of the double—a sensing that something is very similar to another thing but also that they are not quite one and the same. In *The Uncanny*, Freud explains that uncanniness is entangled with repetition, a feeling that something has been repeated or doubled and is, therefore, familiar.

> [The uncanny] is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations. (Freud 940)

This doubling is also very much a part of abjection, though Kristeva refers to it by a different name: the alter ego. The alter ego is simultaneously the other and the self. The self finds itself in the alter ego but creates itself by rejecting the alter ego as a part of the self. This mimesis or doubling effect lies in the ambiguous territory of the abject, pushing against the boundary between ego and non-ego. Kristeva and Freud both note that consciousness is itself a form of doubling, which results, for Kristeva, in a confusion of the ego and alter ego or perhaps even a

fusion of the two and, for Freud, in a strong sense of uncanniness with regards to the repetition of the self and the confusion resulting from this repetition. The inner voice or consciousness is a doubling of the self. In self-critiquing and reflecting, we double the ego and blur our internal borders. Thus, paradoxically, doubling (via consciousness) is used to analyze internally what must be abjected and to abject what is doubled and, therefore, what is confusing, uncanny, and ambiguous. We must double the self in order to protect the self from what is doubled.

Yet another paradox of abjection is that it exists on the outside of the self, creating the border between the ego and the non-ego, but it also is a realm of borderlessness. A thing is rendered abject when it is cast into the realm of borderlessness or when the self is threatened by it because it lays bare the fragility of the border. Not only does the abject form the boundary of the self, but it also "notifies us of the limits of the human universe" (Kristeva 11). Within the limits of the human universe lies society and beyond this limit lies the abject. Just as the self abjects or casts out in order to create its own boundary, society also engages in abjection to form and maintain its own boundary. According to Kristeva, society is a system of rules developed by human beings to protect themselves collectively from the ambiguous and abject. Religion, morality, and law were all designed for society to eliminate fear, uneasiness, ambiguity, and horror through the implementation of borders, positions, and order. The abject works against society, disturbing its rules and systems and exposing its vulnerability. Heinous crime is thus abject because it pushes against the boundaries of the law and breaks open space for ambiguity and confusion. This unknown produces horror. The only societal exception to this phenomenon, according to Kristeva, is literature, which confronts and explores the abject instead of attempting to reinforce boundaries to bar it from society.

So society and the self are both in a constant state of analysis and abjection to maintain their respective boundaries and to combat ambiguity. They push out the abject, which lines the human universe, creating its edges, limits, boundaries, borders. But what lies beyond the abject, if anything at all? The answer, Kristeva claims in *Powers of Horror*, is the sublime. The sublime is "something added," causing us to be in two places (the here and beyond), overstraining and expanding us. The sublime is, then, another form of doubling, since we perceive that we are both here and beyond here in a single moment of sublimation. The ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the sublime and the sensations it arouses seem very much related to the abject and the uncanny. In comparing Kristeva's notion of the sublime with that of Kant's, we discover marked similarities. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the sublime as something existing beyond the physical world, split between the sensible and supersensible, dwarfing humanity and thwarting our reason and understanding (521-3). This split is reminiscent of Kristeva's concept of the alter ego and of Freud's doubling.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines sublimation as "the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal" (11). There is something otherworldly about the sublime for both Kristeva and Kant. But it is an otherworldliness which puts into perspective humanity and gives us brief insight into the possibility of something larger. The sublime is rooted in the unknown, allowing us to momentarily glimpse beyond the limits of the human universe which previously seemed stable and sure. The sublime is thus also connected to the blurring of boundaries and the paradox and ambiguity this produces. The resulting feeling is paradoxical itself, aptly named by Edmund Burke "pleasant terror" and "delightful horror." Like the abject and the uncanny, the sublime causes uneasiness and confusion in destabilizing the boundaries created by human beings to make sense of the world.

These boundaries, which Kristeva claim are what make up the human universe, are also at work for Kant in the sublime. He describes the sublime as a kind of infinite and overwhelming lawfulness and a desire to submit to it (534). So it seems that the destabilization of boundaries by the sublime and by the abject is not the same. The sublime allows us to view past boundaries and makes us hyperaware of their existence. The abject is the breakdown of the border, while the sublime is the imposition of it. But, interestingly enough, both result in terror and horror, though perhaps of different kinds. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva claims that the sublime is what keeps abjection under control. Conversely, she names the entering of the abject into the body the *symptom*. Symptoms are very much integral to the work of Freud in his exploration of psychoanalysis and the interplay between mind and body. A *symptom* for Freud is the physical result of a compromise made between the energy of a drive desperate to express itself and the repression the ego must undergo to maintain order and control. This conflict is productive in Freud's opinion because it allows the self to find a balance between submission and control. The main method of achieving this balance is a continuous cycle of repression.

The process of repression involves a dividing of the drive from the self and a rejection of the drive. The rejection can be in the form of inhibiting, interrupting, redirecting, or delaying the expression of the drive. Repression is the essence of abjection. The thing which must be repressed (or abjected) is one which blurs internal boundaries of right and wrong. These are often primal desires, leading man to stray dangerously into the territory of animalistic behavior such as brutality, lust, gluttony, and the like. The boundary between beast and man is at stake, so the drive must, therefore, be cast out in order to maintain and preserve the self. Kristeva writes that the abject is the object of primal repression, the sublimation of an object inseparable from drives (10-11). In the concept of repression, there is an undeniable interconnectedness of the

sublime, the uncanny, and the abject, coming to a head in the notions of boundaries and repetition. The repetition of the expression of a drive and the suppression, or castration, of that drive from the self and by the self is reminiscent of Freud's claim that the uncanny is entrenched in repetition and familiarity, but it is a familiarity which paradoxically triggers fear, horror, dread, and terror, rather than comfort and ease. These are the same feelings which arise from experiences with the abject and the sublime.

There is a clear connection amongst the abject, uncanny, and sublime, so perhaps this indicates that there is also a connection in terms of the ways in which humanity handles these unsettling experiences. Just as we use society as a set of laws to contain and separate, we also use language as a set of laws to combat the fear of the unknown. Naming is a form of categorization, of boundary creation. It separates parts of our world, making it manageable. The use of written language (literature) is society's way of confronting the abject, according to Kristeva, and the use of verbal language (psychoanalysis and free association) is a way to confront uncanniness and repressed drives, according to Freud. Art, another product of human existence, is interwoven with the idea of the sublime for Kant. In our struggle to impose boundaries in order to maintain structure in a world of ambiguity, it seems that we have learned to use our creative impulses to explore and confront the unknown.

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