

## How Novels Think

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I want to think about the novel as something that thinks. More specifically, I want to think about the novel as a collective process that thinks through conflicts among a culture's major categories to solutions that simply can't be achieved in real life, at least not at the time they are imagined. I realize, of course, that such a definition of the novel comes very close to the way in which Claude Lévi-Strauss defined myth in Pensée Sauvage. It comes even closer perhaps to the definition of narrative that Fredric Jameson appropriated from Lévi-Strauss and made into the psycho-cultural substratum of literary production in The Political Unconscious. The linear axiological process that Lévi-Strauss discovers at work in primitive cultures and to which he grants the status of myth is the same thought mode that Jameson identifies as the "deep structure" of modern literature. Whether they call it "primitive" or "deep," both Lévi-Strauss and Jameson describe as magical thinking the problem-solving logic that seeks and finds a purely symbolic resolution beyond the categories organizing modern realism. Moreover, both set their own problem-solving thought mode in opposition to precisely such magical thinking. In so doing, both repeat the move that Freud makes in his famous explanation of uncanny phenomena. That is to say, they put what was once outside and constitutive of individuals--namely, a collectively disavowed wish--on the inside, where it can be filtered through the sublimating apparatus of modern culture and converted into socially acceptable behavior. I will argue that this theoretical move reproduces the very kind of magical thinking that it disavows.

In thinking about how fiction thinks, I will first try to persuade you that modern fiction performs precisely the form of magical thinking we attribute both to primitive peoples and to members of our own culture who are very young, undereducated, or simply mad. From their early attempts in the late 17th century to pass as travel writing, autobiography, or conduct literature to their celebration of fictionality in the late 20th century, novels have cleverly adjusted the boundaries between life and death, public and private, male and female, and so forth. In other words, novels do for modern cultures pretty much what Lévi-Strauss claims that myth does for tribal cultures. As they carry out the task of reproducing the cultural boundaries within which we dwell, novels naturalize the rules that maintain the essential difference between culture and nature necessary to distinguish what is outside from what comes from inside the individual. By translating these differences into what we call common sense, novels allow us to go about the business of daily life.

Should you find this comparison holds up after further elaboration, you will have to conclude, along with me, that the same group of people who believe they have surmounted magical thinking actually consume great and regular quantities of such thinking in novels. Fiction displays its problem solving magic so as to suggest that what the human sciences have identified as elemental wishes, fantasies, and even drives may not in fact have a natural source deep within each and every member of the human species. On the contrary, given that fiction remains the privileged medium of modern cultures, its open display of magical thinking suggests that such thinking may very well have an external cultural source. If this is true, then, contrary to prevailing opinion, magical thinking does not threaten the internal coherence of modern cultures so much as provide the semiotic glue holding them together. To understand how much is indeed at stake in identifying the source of what we designate as magical thinking and how difficult that source is to discern, one need look no farther than Freud's essay on "The Uncanny."

Here, Freud draws on his theory of repression to relocate what was once outside and collectively embraced by pre-modern cultures inside the mind, where it forms the deepest layer of modern consciousness. To achieve this radical transformation of external culture into internal nature, he turns to E.T.A Hoffman's story "The Sandman." The appearance of the protagonist's double in this story is so disturbing, Freud maintains, because, the double is a "creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one, no doubt, in which it wore a more friendly aspect." This creation once wore a more friendly aspect, he proceeds to explain, because there was once a time when the "ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons." Before an individual understands the difference between his fantasy of the world and the world itself, that individual has no basis for distinguishing subject from object, or self from other. Hoffman's story strikes readers as so disturbing, Freud concludes, because it validates an infantile way of thinking that challenges the difference between inside and outside. All well and good.

When Freud turns from fiction to life in the form of a personal anecdote, however, his essay on the uncanny begins to erode the very difference on which adult thinking depends, and his essay momentarily takes on some the features of its uncanny subject matter. Freud recalls that he was once strolling through a foreign city, when he inadvertently entered

"a quarter the character of which I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place."

At the moment, Freud was apparently convinced that the street was not just another street in a foreign city but one that directed his movement back to a place he wished to leave. The loss of agency that accompanied this conviction is preserved in the curious intransitivity of his description of the street, where nothing but "painted women were to be seen," to which he had "wandered without being directed," and where he "suddenly found myself" against his will. The street seemed not only "devious" but also capable of controlling his movement, he

concludes, because the force that animated the city was not something foreign and outside his body after all, but rather something within him that he had repressed. Indeed, something at once so foreign and yet familiar can only be one thing. As he explains several pages later in the essay, "whenever a man says to himself [in a dream], 'this place is familiar to me, I have been there before,' we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case, too, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimish*, home-like, familiar."

Those who smile quietly as Freud recounts the circuitous journey that returned him for a third time to the forbidden sex zone of a foreign city have been successfully enlisted as his partners in a joke. The Freud who temporarily regresses to an infantile thought mode plays the butt of the joke. But the Freud who objectifies and debases magical thinking tells the joke, thereby recovering his interpretive authority over material that had once troubled him. It is possible, however, to give this particular joke one more turn of the screw. Let us suppose that instead of the unacknowledged fantasies that form the elemental core of modern consciousness, what we encounter in those moments Freud characterizes as uncanny is not of the core but at the periphery of individuated consciousness, something inherently foreign, with the capacity to change our very nature. Let us suppose, moreover, that whatever it is, this phenomenon is not working undercover. In this event, the explanation for Freud's circular itinerary would have to take that experience at face value. We would have to concede that there is something about the city itself that directs foreign visitors into its red light district. Perhaps it is not, after all, a degraded version of his own sexuality that Freud encounters there but an alternative sexuality that does not understand itself in relation to the bourgeois family and therefore has no interest in reproducing it--or not. If so, as an inexpert reader of the situation, Freud is in over his head. He is the butt of the joke, not because he has wandered into foreign territory but because he refuses to recognize cultural difference, preferring to see it as a degraded element of himself.

Freud was not completely happy with this attempt to ground the literature of the uncanny in real life instances of the "return of the repressed." He may well have recognized that his uncanny subject matter did more to challenge than to support his theory of repression, when he went to natural history for the means of grounding his real-life examples in nature. Drawing on the evolutionary principle that each species, in its own development, recapitulates the evolutionary phases of species lower on the phylogenetic tree, Freud argues that each member of a modern culture passes through the stages of collective thought embraced by his primitive forebears. By surmounting those earlier ways of thinking, human consciousness is not only modernized but also individuated. Lodged within the modern individual as infantile fantasies, old thought modes occasionally emerge, as when one finds himself involuntarily returning to the same location in a foreign city. In so doing, such thought modes destabilize our adult perception of reality. Having moved from literature to life and from life to natural history in hopes of confining magic to the primitive recesses of modern consciousness, Freud all but admits that the truth could be just the other way around. He all but admits that the difference between inside and outside on which the very existence of modern consciousness appears to hinge might well be a product of magical thinking rather than a fact of nature that can be subjected to scientific analysis.

In this case, moments when magical thinking seems to triumph would have to be understood as moments when modern beliefs can't explain events and old beliefs take over. At these moments, such infantile fantasies as "the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish fulfillment, the secret power to do harm, and the return of the dead" not only transgress the limits of individuated consciousness, but also expose the fact that those limitations are as much a cultural acquisition as the old belief in omnipotent thinking. The more he tries to differentiate the feeling we get when repressed material wells up within us from the feeling we get when only old collective thought modes can explain the world, the more Freud undermines the difference between the individual's internal nature and the culture supposedly external to him. As if ready to throw in the towel in this effort, he makes one last attempt at clarifying the difference: "We might say that in the one case what had been repressed was a particular ideational content and in the other the belief in its physical existence." But this last way of putting it, Freud admits, "strains the term 'repression' beyond its legitimate meaning."

What happens to the concept of the "return of the repressed" once the concept of repression is called into question? The model of subject formation that Foucault somewhat playfully calls "the repressive hypothesis" can point us toward an answer. According to this model of subject formation, modern culture put the outside--in the form of any sexuality that did not reproduce a modern family--on the inside and discovered it there, in the form of repressed desires that threaten adult respectability. Thus we can regard Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" as the perfect structural inversion of Freud's "return of the repressed." Foucault claims that rather than discover the deep meaning beneath an opaque surface, we actually implant our own cultural categories as the truth that preceded and called for a veil of opacity. Thus mistaking our culture's definition of nature for human nature itself is a self-defeating way to proceed if we want to understand how another culture thinks. To do so tends to make us feel we are controlled by another's desire, whenever circumstances refuse to mirror our normal explanation for them. This comes pretty close indeed to the way Freud describes the sensation of discovering that he had circled around for the third time to the red light district in a foreign city. He felt at the time as if someone or something else compelled him to return to this forbidden zone, he reasons later, simply because he was directed by desires that he had not acknowledged as his own. The uncanny feeling vanished as soon as he owned up to being the source of this mysterious agency.

But what if, as Foucault claims, we do not discover the operations of the unconscious in our lives so much as produce explanations for certain events, explanations that invariably return agency to the interpreter? To observe this alternative epistemology, we would have to regard Freud's personal anecdote as a mechanism that inverts outside and inside, relocating an external desire within himself, where he can claim it as his own and restore the autonomy necessary to his sense of agency. Having thus turned the so-called "return of the repressed" inside out, we can then proceed to recast Freud's explanation for uncanny occurrences in terms that challenge his primary distinction between nature and culture. Instead of saying, I feel that I am controlled by someone else's desire because that someone is myself only I don't know it, he would have to say, I feel as if I am being controlled by someone else's desire, because I have disavowed the fact that my true identity comes from outside and thus perhaps from someone else after all. Just as it is self-affirming to discover that our own cultural categories can explain individuals who would appear to think differently from ourselves, so we are likely to find it profoundly destabilizing to confront evidence that suggests that what we consider most ourselves does not in fact come from somewhere deep inside us. We feel queasy when someone else's desire appears to be acting on and through

us, because such an occurrence exposes our individuality as the fragile, even illusory thing it is. Thus, for Freud, the difference between hanging onto the idea of repression or giving it up boils down to the difference between pollution, which is to ingest something that makes one other than oneself, and self-expression, which is to objectify one's individuality in culturally acceptable forms.

From the beginning of the rise of the novel and the consolidation of the group of people for whom it was the privileged reading material, novels conscientiously distinguished themselves from other forms of magical thinking. In The Female Quixote, Charlotte Lennox fills her heroine's head with romantic nonsense and allows that material to direct her heroine's desires, only to show that externally induced desires lead to embarrassing categorical mistakes. Arabella's preference in men is no less at odds with the values that ought to define a woman of her social position than her sense of fashion and idea of how courtship ought to proceed. By allowing her heroine to acquire her every motive from a cultural source, Lennox demonstrates 1) that desires originating outside the individual won't help him or her negotiate a social world in a state of flux, 2) that in acting on desires that come from outside him or herself, the individual betrays those desires which come from within, and 3) that fiction is absolutely necessary for purposes of distinguishing mere convention from genuine desire, precisely because fiction makes those who give into wishful thinking the butt of a culture-wide joke. Don't trust romances, this novel says. Romances are fictions that provide misleading roadmaps to social life. But because I emphatically disavow romance conventions, claims the same novel, you can rely on me for information that will help you negotiate an otherwise misleading world of signs.

Careful consideration of what novels accomplish by peddling themselves as pedagogy is essential to understanding how novels think. The Female Quixote first floods a rather satisfactory social situation with wishes, wishes that expose the limitation of prevailing literary conventions. The novel quickly proceeds to turn those wishes sour, as if to convince readers that all such wishing has been done to teach us not to make wishes that we don't want to live out. To learn from the novel, however, readers must, like Arabella, accept certain cultural assumptions. We have to believe that dangerously artificial wishes come from the culture external to the heroine, while reliably genuine wishes were there all along, buried in her heart and awaiting definition as such by Lennox's novel. This, I would argue, is the novel's point--not to strip us of what Lennox calls "the most extravagant expectations," but rather to make us believe that certain of those expectations are deeply and fundamentally ours. After identifying romance as the source of false desire, in other words, the novel explicitly disavows that source. By doing so, this particular novel is not all that different from any other, just more forthright in showing us how much its authority depends on the very kind of wishful thinking it claims not to do.

I have suggested that the primitive core within ourselves is not the source of our individuality in that it, too, has a source--a source, moreover, that is external and purely cultural. I have come pretty close to equating the novel with that someone or something else who thinks us into being as thoughtful creatures, but I have refrained from making this equation in so many words, because, as Lennox would caution, there are novels and then there are novels. To make the crucial distinction between the novels that we read and write

about and the novels that compel our reading habits, let me turn to the work of the scholar-critic we are here to celebrate today. Homer Brown begins his Institutions of the Novel by defining the modern concept of "institution" as one that collapses the process of institution making into institutions that are consequently made to seem self originating and responsible for spawning more of their kind. Brown's cunning examination of novel historiography concludes that institutions become generative sites of origin only retrospectively, as their successors pay homage to the model they are most intent on revising. He claims that at some point early in the nineteenth century novels turned the tables on their producers and consumers and began to determine the character and plots in terms of which their history would be told. In this manner, Brown's discussion of "institution" brings us face to face with an important paradox. If "the novel" exercises institutional authority over those who read, write, and proclaim it good or bad, then who or what authorizes "the novel"?

To arrive at an answer to this final question, let us consider the institution of "the novel" in terms of the act of disavowal that allowed Freud to make sense of his wandering through a foreign city. It is just too coincidental to be merely coincidental that Brown should use the same trope to launch the concluding paragraph of his book: "I have tried to follow the wandering adventures of the Defoe text, more complicated but not unlike Yorick's sermon in Tristram Shandy. I think it is safe to assume that these restless wanderings, not unlike those of Robinson, have not yet returned home and perhaps never can." "Wandering" is the word Freud uses to describe what happens when he has neither motive nor destination of his own. "Wandering" is Brown's descriptive term for an institution created retrospectively, as successive acts of displacement move fiction farther from rather than closer to home. As Freud himself admits, however, his "wandering" was neither motiveless nor misdirected. Rather than give any credence to the possibility that alternative cultural beliefs were in operation, Freud discovered a source for those residual beliefs within himself, in the infantile fantasies that resemble primitive thought. Whenever we institutionalize a novel, Brown implies, we are placing a similar limit on the genre, if not on each and every text, a limit that compels readers to look within that novel for the principle behind its apparent wandering. If the compulsion to relocate the outside on the inside is, as I have argued, the signature gesture of novelistic thinking, then the who or what that authorizes the novel is nothing more nor less than such novelistic thinking. This disavowal of its institutionalizing power is essential to that power. This disavowal, however, also guarantees that every attempt at institutionalization will produce an excess destined to disturb the closure thereby achieved. This excess tells us that any novel depends for generic identity upon the very primitive thinking it routinely disavows. Modeled on the novel and curiously dependent on reading novels, modern individuals are quite probably the vehicles and products of this magic rather than its cause.