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Freud's Uncanny and Speculative Elegy

Abi Curtis

Imagine you have a new house. Such a wonderful house that you will never move again – that is to imply that you will die here one day. It has been somewhat neglected and is covered in dust, and the garden is overgrown, but it holds such promise for the future. It comes with one piece of furniture, a wooden table exquisitely carved with 'leaves and flowers'. And alligators. Or crocodiles (depending on whether you prefer the New- or Old-World terms). The sound of weeping, false or otherwise. A wooden table, once a living tree, now representing living things: flora, fauna, and the crocodiles which are, as Rod Giblett writes, 'a wetland inhabitant of the intermediary zone between dry land and deep water', upsetting the boundary between the two (308). But you are not in deep water yet; you are an optimistic character in a short fiction by L. G. Moberly, a story which Freud mentions in his essay as producing 'a quite remarkable' uncanny feeling. All is well. You have a beautiful new house (where you will one day die), a beautiful table, and that pervading swampy smell that must only be the drains...

So, the couple move in: 'We turned in an army of workpeople, and by the middle of May the house was clean and fresh from attic to basement...we felt that we had come there to stay, probably for the rest of our natural lives' (186). How 'natural' are these lives? Not natural enough that they might stand the overgrown creeper outside the window, the smell of the swamp, the accumulated dust. How long will these lives last? The implication is that one can live an 'unnatural' life, and ironically that is what this couple seem to prefer. There is such a thing, in this story, as too much naturalness. The inert, carved crocodiles soon come to life. They refuse to remain merely a representation of life, and slither, patter and even bellow around the house. I want to suggest that this is definable as uncanny not simply because of the animism of this mysterious table, but that the story is haunted by the future deaths of its protagonists and their thwarted attempts to separate themselves from nature. At the start of the story, the estate agent repeats compulsively 'like a parrot cry' that the table 'goes with the house' (186) – there is no house without crocodiles. The haunting nature of the crocs is amplified by a visit from the appropriately named Jack

Wilding, whose past trauma where he witnessed a friend killed by an alligator seems to pervade the house 'like the smell of the swamp ... pregnant with evil' (190). As Wilding tells them about the death he speaks in 'abrupt jerks' and turns his head with 'a curious, uneasy movement' not unlike a crocodile, pausing as if 'speech were almost impossible'. Death is unspeakable, trauma is unspeakable, the wild is somehow unspeakable. The story's protagonist feels the horror of another's encounter with the crocodile. It is almost as if the entire story were about Wilding's fears, even though he does not appear in it until halfway through. The swamp is also said to be 'pregnant with evil', and the crocodiles are repeatedly described as 'pattering' (as in 'of tiny feet'). Furthermore, the servant's cryptic comments about knowing 'no more than the babe unborn' (188) suggest that this couple, currently childless, have babies on their minds. Such future lives will be unpredictable and will change their own status in the 'natural' order, bringing them closer to death.

The couple, who can no longer stand the slithering around their feet, retreat to the servants' house in the garden. There is too much nature in the main house itself. Mrs Jenkins, a servant, proclaims 'Cats is cats, and dogs is dogs, and troubles they both may be, and I'm not denyin' they are, but still they are what you might call human...the animals that come slithering in and out o' the scullery and kitchen — they ain't human' (193). So domestic creatures count as part of the human world, but the swamp, the uncultivated, the wild – that must be kept away. In the end, the table is burned and is said to be 'not part of the house anymore...It's not part of anything in so far as matter never dies ...' (195). Matter never dies. But perhaps, eventually it does – and that, for the couple denying death, is the problem.

All of this in a short story that Freud declares to be particularly uncanny but does not even give us the title of. Nor does he remark on its narrative voice or the nested story of Wilding's friend's death. The story's title is 'Inexplicable' – that in itself an invitation to attempt to provide an explanation. But the narrator also turns to the reader and invites them directly, in its final line, to participate in its meaning: 'But it was many a long day before I could live down those weird experiences, and even now they are to me quite inexplicable. / Does any explanation of it all occur to you?' (195). Freud barely takes up the invitation, but this effacement of the boundary between reader and text mirrors the boundary transgressed by the crocodiles

themselves, and the boundary where 'literature ends and real life or psychoanalysis...begins' as Nicholas Royle states (134).

I want to suggest that the story functions as a kind of elegy, both in the conventional sense – Wilding mourns the loss of his friend and the table stands for a lost environment – and potentially in a speculative sense. The term 'Speculative Elegy', which resonates with McDonald and Clarke's term 'Speculative Memoir' in relation to the work of Kazuo Ishiguro (75) and Timothy Morton's 'Ecological-Elegy', might be used in relation to this story. That is to say, elegy that mourns before the loss is complete. Morton says: 'ecological elegy is...about the future, and this future has two distinct modes. In the first mode there is nothing left for elegy at all. In the second there is no end to the work of mourning. More strangely still, each mode may appear simultaneously in any given text' (251). The couple in the story attempt to keep nature under control – cutting back the creeper outside, cleaning the drains. But all the time the natural, wild world comes to life, and there might be new life to come. They have said they desire to end their 'natural lives' in the house, in contradiction to their controlling actions. One can't help looking forward to those deaths and the natural world creeping back into the house once more. Morton suggests that elegy is essential for bringing into consciousness, in uncanny terms, 'what should have remained hidden' (U1:345): 'The really difficult elegiac work would consist in bringing into full consciousness the reality of human and nonhuman interdependence, in a manner that threatens the comfortable way in which humans appear in the foreground and everything else in the background' (256). Ecological thought, Morton argues, requires the 'radical intimacy with a radical stranger that the idea of the interrelatedness of all things implies' (269). That is what the crocodiles are in 'Inexplicable': radical strangers, intimately slithering through the text, refusing to remain part of the furniture, positively 'pregnant with evil' – excessively alive. The characters try to deny this, repressing the notion of their own part in nature, and by implication their future deaths (which they seem, nevertheless, to be looking forward to). They foresee and begin to understand their place in the natural order, but burn the table before thoroughly acknowledging it. They attempt to 'get over nature', in Morton's terms, rather than going 'under' or 'through' it. A process of 'introjection' takes place, where mourning becomes, in Jacques Derrida's reformulation of Maria Torok, 'fantasmatic, unmediated, instantaneous, magical, sometimes hallucinatory' (7).

One of the meanings of the word 'crocodile' is an 'ancient sophism or dilemma' (OED, b.) and that is what this story presents: the dilemma of the couple's future deaths, in a home seemingly so perfect that they unconsciously wish their lives away. The crocodiles remind them that yes, loss is coming, and is indeed a part of life, but until then the living must slither, creep, and bellow with all their might.

Notes

1. L. G. Moberly, 'Inexplicable' (1917), reproduced in *Strange Tales from The Strand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
2. Rod Giblett, 'Alligators, Crocodiles and the Monstrous Uncanny', in *Continuum*, 20:3, 299-312, 2006.
3. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
4. Alan Clarke and Keith McDonald, 'Days of Past Futures: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as "Speculative Memoir"', in *Biography* 30:1, 74-83, Winter 2007.
5. Timothy Morton, 'The Dark Ecology of Elegy' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (Ed. Weisman, K. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
6. Jacques Derrida, 'Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok', trans. Barbara Johnson, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: a Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).