BOOK REVIEW

Katherine Withy's

Heidegger on Being Uncanny

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Katherine Withy. *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 250 pages.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger attempts to formulate phenomenologi-
cally what is, in fact, a logically impossible question: *What is being?*
In parallel, Katherine Withy's 2015 text *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*
posits that "the question of the uncanny does not admit of an answer…
By this encountering what is questionable about uncanniness, we en-
counter our uncanniness itself as a question" (236). In spite of, or rather,
precisely *because of* this parallel paradox, Withy is able to argue that
Heidegger makes the uncanny key to his explication of the meaning of
being. Overall, her argument is detailed and convincing.

Withy introduces the concept of the uncanny by reviewing some
of its most typical associations: hauntings, robots, death, animacy, un-
certainty, etc. In her first chapter, she spends some time discussing
Freud – though not nearly enough – and returns to him, again only
briefly, in the last chapter. Her discussion of Freud appears alongside
what reads as somewhat tangential material: Lear on the ironic un-
canny, Cavell on uncanny skepticism, Camus and Nagel on absurd
experience as uncanny. While this material will interest some readers,

much of it could have been trimmed. While she refers back to this content periodically, especially Freud, it remains peripheral to the main task of the book. Somewhat belatedly, Withy begins to build her central thesis in the second chapter, which is not about the uncanny as a diverse term, or about the uncanny as a feeling or experience, but is specifically about the uncanny as a Heideggerian ontological concept. Her main argument is that "uncanniness is one formulation (among others. . .) of the single star that guided Heidegger's thought: the turn of the counterturning between presencing and absencing" (242). She then reviews in great detail the three texts that contain Heidegger's most explicit and sustained use of the term "uncanny": *Being and Time* (1927), *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), and *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* (1942). Her treatment of each is rigorous and clear. Yet given this focus, one feels a bit confused about her choice to spend time discussing the aforementioned treatments of the uncanny (Lear, Cavell, etc.), where a discussion of Schelling and Nietzsche — and a more thorough assessment of Freud — seems more apropos if her guiding question is exegetical.

In any case, beginning with *Being and Time*, Withy motivates her claim for the centrality of the uncanny with a clear explication of Dasein as being-in-the-world, mood, and — crucially — angst. Angst, of course, is the special sort of uncanny mood which reveals being. In the uncanny mood of angst our essential being is revealed in its uncanniness as uncanny. Dasein itself, as a being, is also shown to be uncanny: it is itself and is not itself. Through this essential paradox that *is* Dasein, being itself is shown to be uncanny. Withy terms this "counterturning": the presencing and withdrawing of being as being itself (111). The centrality of the uncanny in Heidegger's thought is further validated by Withy's detailed close reading of his interpretation of the first choral ode in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Heidegger translates the word *deinon* (terrible, powerful, strange) as *unheimlich* (uncanny). The first line of the ode thus reads: "Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing uncannier than man bestirs itself" (cited at 108). This interpretation first appears in Heidegger's 1935 lecture course *Introduction to Metaphysics* (GA 40).

There, he is quite explicit about the import of uncanniness, writing, "The chorus' concluding words . . . are the direct and complete confirmation of the uncanniness of human essence" (GA 40: 126/175–76). He returns to the ode again in his 1942 lecture course *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* (GA 53), stating: "Humankind emerges from uncanniness and remains within it – looms out of it and stirs within it" (GA 53: 72/89; cited at 142). Withy seems to justifiably interpret the uncanny in *Being and Time* in light of the later use of it in the ode: as indicative of origin (see esp. ch. 3). Consider her retelling of Heidegger's interpretation of "the opening strophes of the first choral ode as telling a story about Dasein's essential origin as the entity that understands being" (206). This is powerful, but Withy's argument for the increasing centrality of the concept of the uncanny in his work might have been made stronger by the inclusion of more texts where the notion of the uncanny is less explicit or even entirely implicit. She does this to some degree, mentioning other terms that are, in certain contexts, cognates or at least related (*Angst, deinon, pelein, polis, Ereignis*, etc.). However, there are no thorough analyses of similar terms or cases beyond the aforementioned texts.

Furthermore, since nearly a full chapter of non-Heideggerian uncanny literature was included, the discussion could have been enriched by a more sustained consideration of the Freudian picture, and related psychoanalytic interpretations of the uncanny. In particular, and more recently, Withy might have considered exploring the work of Heideggerian psychoanalyst Alan Bass (whose Derrida translation she does cite on p. 104). In his book *Difference and Interpretation: The Strangeness of Care*, Bass develops a thorough synthetic reading of Freud and Heidegger, in a Derridean vein. He considers the developing psyche (Freud) to have existential-phenomenological value (Heidegger). Demonstrating the often-striking correspondence of psychoanalytic developmental dynamics and phenomenological structures, he writes, "The automatic periodicity of bodily hunger [lack] cannot be divorced from the automatic periodicity of registration of the differentiating double – the mother of primary narcissism, the differential impression of a *relation*.

Familiar, empirical *need* gratification is the structurally uncanny need to be 'outside' oneself."[1] Bass connects this essentially to a Heideggerian understanding of finitude, temporality, unity, relation, etc. in a way that could have enhanced Withy's analysis. She focuses precisely on these paradoxical concepts to link the uncanny essentially to origin and creation. Yet here Withy struggles: "There is no reason to think that Heidegger's account of Dasein's essence should fit with Freud's analysis of the German term '*unheimlich*'" (220). The reason, which she seems to have curiously overlooked, is their relation to the question of origin and thus temporality.

Heidegger's most direct engagement with psychoanalytic ideas is in the *Zollikon Seminars* (1959–1969). Though he does not directly engage with the Freudian concept of the uncanny there, he does use the term, in a somewhat different sense:

> We are living in a peculiar, strange, and uncanny age. The more frantically the volume of information increases, the more decisively the misunderstanding and blindness to the phenomena grows. Furthermore, the more excessive the information, the less we have the capacity for the following insight: Modern thought is increasingly blinded and becomes a visionless calculation, providing only the chance to rely on effect and possibly on the sensational (GA 89: 272/ZS 74).

Here, Heidegger was preoccupied with his view of psychoanalysis as symptomatic of the larger trend of overly scientific means of understanding human being, and being in general. The connection between feeling unhomely and the technologized modern world has both existential and political implications here. In this late publication, his use of the uncanny in reference to our "age" is a reference to his work on ontotheology.

This brings me to a second, and perhaps more substantive critique: In his late work Heidegger characterizes historical epochs that reveal being as intelligible in different ways (see, e.g., "The Origin of the Work

of Art"). Given that this process entails the revealing and concealing of being as such, and in light of his emphasis on the uncanny in relation to historicity in his analysis of the choral ode, such an analysis of his later work certainly would have been a valuable addition to Withy's study of Heidegger's uncanny. Indeed, Heidegger's shift from temporality to historicity is particularly pertinent. The role of the uncanny in historicity is dramatically present in Withy's analysis of the choral ode. "The ode is indeed an origin story, but the origin it tells is not a historical origin…but ontological: it is an account of the human essence or what it means to be human" (103). And later, "thus the polis is the site of *dikē* [*fittingness*] and of history as well as the ground of the political" (152).

Yet when Withy discusses the notions of home, identity, and destiny – even explicitly that of the German people, she fails to adequately consider Heidegger's political context. She writes, "Heidegger takes [Antigone] to exemplify owned uncanniness. Working out how she does so will show in what sense *Antigone* remains a 'political' drama for Heidegger and Antigone a 'political' heroine" (154). She notes his definition of "world-historical creators, who question the world into which they are thrown" and "rise high in historical being as creators, as doers" (GA 40: 117/163; cited at 163), before continuing to claim that "Paradigmatically, the world-historical creator 'rises high' in the polis (clearing) in the sense that she masters (by revising) *dikē*, the order of the world" (164). To overlook the obvious connection to fascism here seems inappropriate. Even when Withy states that the *Antigone* interpretation is political – in an ontological sense – the closest she gets to a historical acknowledgment is the following statement:

> Heidegger discusses this kind of being unhomely or being *apolis* at length in HI [*Der Ister*], and he does so because he has a particular interest in the situation of the German people and in the articulation of German culture by Hölderlin. Germany's destiny is very much a live question at the time of these lectures (1942), and the reading of Hölderlin – and the detour through Sophocles – is supposed to clarify Germany's historical

> situation (although it is unclear to me precisely how it does so, given that HI fully ontologizes the reading of the ode). (167)

To reduce the role of nationalism in Nazi Germany in 1942 to merely a "live question" seems careless, if not offensive. Of course, the question of how Heidegger's thought related to his politics remains an extremely complex and fiercely debated topic – much too extensive for adequate discussion in Withy's text. But, in the wake of the publication of the *Black Notebooks* in 2014, if one is going to properly discuss the connection in Heidegger between uncanniness and the *polis*, one must confront the racially and ethnically charged nature of his thoughts on the "wordlessness of Judaism" (GA 95: 97/76), which he frequently distinguished from the putatively *bodenständig* "German Dasein" (GA 36/37: 89/71).

Withy's parenthetical comment expressing confusion over how an ontological concept (historicity) could have a historical value ("[clarifying] Germany's historical situation") points toward where Heidegger's late work began to go: defining ontological epochs. He calls the modern technological epoch an "uncanny age." This implies that it previously was, or could be, a less uncanny or not uncanny age – a strange departure from his previous technical-ontological sense of the term. But this tension, I think, is consistent with his struggle to explicate historicity as the ontological condition of possibility for the historical. This later sense of the uncanny also seems poignantly compatible with most contemporary usages, which tend to refer either to horror films (which are in their own way technologically uncanny) or to automation and digitization (self-driving cars, facial recognition software, talking/learning robots, etc.). As Withy herself notes: "It used to be the case that the first point of reference for evoking and discussing the uncanny feeling was ghosts or hauntings. Nowadays, we are more likely to talk about humanoid robots" (12). This interestingly mirrors the historical shift away from mythology and religiosity toward technoscience. This was perhaps foreseen by Heidegger:

> The dogma that [everything in] the world is completely calculable and that the calculable world is the [only] true reality [is a conception] pushing us toward uncanny developments – already looming now – in which one no longer asks who and how the human being is. Instead, he [the human being] is conceived of beforehand from the background of the technical manipulatability of the world. (GA 89: 861/ZS 141)

To give a fully satisfying account of Heidegger's treatment of the uncanny, arguably, Withy could have spent more time situating this treatment in relation to Heidegger's development of both temporality and subsequently ontologized history.

In sum, the book is a bit conflicted and incomplete: it is not a full treatment of the concept of the uncanny in general (beyond Heidegger), but it also does not quite manage to provide an exhaustive exploration of the uncanny (as a term, or as a concept by other names) strictly within Heidegger's oeuvre. That said, Withy's text is the most exhaustive study of Heidegger's notion of the uncanny to date, which in itself is an admirable achievement. Furthermore, it is a testament to the rigor of her research and the clarity of her writing and argumentation that the shortcomings I have adumbrated here do not significantly reduce the value of the text. In fact, these omissions perhaps ultimately exemplify Withy's (and Heidegger's) argument about the uncanny itself: it provides productive absences. This text will prove exceedingly useful for any scholar interested in Heidegger, or any reader drawn to the mysterious and relentlessly recurrent resurrections of the uncanny.

NOTES

1   Alan Bass, *Difference and Interpretation: The Strangeness of Care* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 67.