

Paper given to a conference on

Culture and the Unconscious: Psychoanalysts, artists, academics

“It’s all a plot”: paranoid characters and mad readers in Gide and Kafka’

The subject matter for this paper arose in response to a thesis I recently examined. A Lacanian reading of certain art objects, it argued that a work of art cannot be a fetish object.

‘A work of art does not ward off anxiety, rather it provokes it’.

The implication of this assertion is that works of art can and perhaps should be uncanny objects: things which provoke anxiety. My own view is that there is one crucial problem with this belief. This is the ‘problem’ of intentionality, or rather the assumption of intentionality in the response of the viewer or reader, and the relation of that assumption to realism.

Realism is a mode of reading, and the art objects I am concerned with here are texts. It may be the case that art objects directly available to our sight and touch are a quite distinct case, and it would be interesting to pursue this in discussion later. But I want to ask this: how does reading work to dissipate the potential uncanniness of a work of art?

I will suggest that the chief presumption in play in this process is intentionality, that is, the attribution to an implied author of the purposeful work of patterning the text. A reader who wants to survive a reading without danger is motivated by the choice to find ways through, to *see the act of reading as the act of finding ways through*, the density of a text, via the principle of intentionality.

In ‘The Uncanny’, in a crucial few pages at the end of the text, Freud argues that uncanny effects in a fiction depend on the quotient of realism that precedes the entry of the disquieting object or event. Myth and fairytales cannot incorporate uncanny elements because ghosts and goblins belong there as of right. It is only when *‘the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality’* that things which would strike us as disturbing in the everyday world – and indeed, many others, given the flexibility of the world of invention – have the same uncanny effect on the page. *‘We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object’.*

A repetition is uncanny when it exceeds coincidence. In the everyday world, we can incorporate coincidence, but repetition to the third degree starts to provoke a feeling of paranoia. Is it all a plot? Is someone directing my steps, and if so who and why? For very religious people, everything in the world is authored, it is a great complex book in which we are all characters. But for the rest of us, the exclamation 'it's all a plot', unless it becomes cohered into a paranoiac world-view, is a recognition that we are wandering into the space of the uncanny.

For characters in fiction, it *is* all a plot. The pleasure of realism is to taste a world very like our own, but in which people who look a lot like you and me do not realise they are being manipulated for our pleasure. Where the uncanny occurs *for a reader* is where the author breaks the promise to supply that pleasure to us by denying it to the characters. The distinction between my knowing pleasure in fiction and the characters' embeddedness in plot is the line that the uncanny reading crosses. Now I propose to look at two texts in which the reader works to try and keep that line secure.

In *Les Caves du Vatican*, Gide is fascinated by the intricacies of plotting in various senses. The first is the everyday one of a conspiracy set up by a group of confidence tricksters who have decided to make themselves rich by telling gullible Catholics that the Pope has been kidnapped and is languishing, waiting for rescue, in the Vatican cellars. The second main meaning of plot is that of authorship, represented within the text by the uninspired writer Julius de Baraglioul whose obsessive wish is to be invited into the Académie française, an honour which can be earned only by knowing the right people.

Les Caves is a network of networks. There is the Catholic Church, to which most of the characters belong and whose blind loyalty to an only occasionally visible head (God, the Vatican, the Pope) makes its members comically susceptible to false belief. One of those taken in is kind bumbling Amédée Fleurissoire who sets out like an knight errant of old to release the Pope from his supposed incarceration. There is its mirror image, freemasonry, to which belongs at the start of the text the scientist Anthime Armand-Dubois. One night, he is visited by a vision of the Virgin Mary and transmutes from a freemason to a true believer. Has he altered from one extreme to the other? Or has he simply stepped from one network to an almost identical one? In other words, is it ever possible to step outside the social structure of networks and conspiracies and be something like 'free'?

Anthime, Amédée and Julius are brothers-in-law, each belonging to one rung of the bourgeoisie and married to three sisters. Into this extended family web steps its contrary, the

beautiful Lafcadio, bastard son of the Comte de Baraglioul, Julius's father. Lafcadio has never carried the name of the father, with all its burdens; But as soon as his mother has died, he has visiting cards printed with his father's surname added to his first name and goes to pay the dying Count a visit.

The old man is impressed by the youth's confidence, gifts and beauty: 'I grant that you are not stupid and it pleases me that you are not ugly, he declares. But he forbids him to wear mourning or in any way identify himself with the Baraglioul family. 'My child, the family is a great closed thing, and you will never be anything but a bastard.

Here the position of illegitimacy is represented as that of the excluded outsider, the one who will not inherit, be acknowledged, or enter the beneficial system of that 'great closed thing', the family. But 100 pages later, there another definition of bastardy is offered by the chief conman Protos: 'what an advantage the bastard has ! Just think : someone whose very existence is the product of a bit of mischief, a swerve in the straight line.... The bastard is the one who escapes from the web, works outside it, possessing it by knowledge not inclusion: his very existence defies the system of systems.

Gide was always fascinated by the possibility of a gratuitous action, the quintessence of which is the crime motivated only by a wish to act outside the chain of consequences that lead by inference to detection. When Lafcadio pushes an annoying old codger out of a train window, he is delighted to think that he has authored another 'swerve in the straight line', which will seal his position outside the multiple systems in his fictional world.

Not all of these systems are as simple to be outside as the family, the Catholic Church or freemasonry. He finds himself entering less expectedly into two other thought-systems. The first of these is the authorial plot hatched by his half-brother Julius. Lafcadio listens with growing seduction to the plotline. He comments: 'You reason about his crime ; he simply commits it. Julius will never write the book because the event has preceded him : 'A providential stroke ! It's dreadful : just imagine, my brother-in-law has been murdered!' This is news to Lafcadio to whom the man was just 'the little old man in the carriage'. In discovering that a chance act has bound him into, rather than confirmed his place outside, the extended family web, he is perplexed. But does it matter?

Lafcadio makes a number of mistakes. He has, it turns out, left a piece of evidence at the scene, and Protos holds it. He fails to recognise his erstwhile schoolfriend, and is thus caught in his net. He has fallen into the trap of thinking himself outside *all* laws, for, as Protos stresses pedantically, 'what astonishes me is that, knowing how intelligent you are,

Cadio, you could have thought that a person can simply step out of one society without automatically falling into another - or that any society could exist without laws. The young man cannot escape the web of laws, he only has the choice between whose law he should submit to: 'I'd prefer you to obey me, says Protos, because, you know, I'd really be sorry to turn in an old friend like you to the police - but what else can I do? From now on you are in their hands - or ours.

After a series of twists, Lafcadio walks free. In the last scene of the book he returns to his half-brother's house where Geneviève, the latter's daughter, hearing his story, begs him to run away. 'I can't', he tells her: 'Where could I possibly run to? Even if I could escape from the police, I couldn't escape from myself... And besides you would despise me for escaping. The girl agrees: only God can save him from his guilt. They fall into each other's arms. The next morning, he gazes at her sleeping face, listening

through the light sound of her breathing, to the vague noises of the city shaking off its night-time torpor. Far off, in the barracks, a bugle rings out. What! is he really to renounce life? And to win the esteem of Geneviève, whom already he esteems a little less now that she loves him a little more, is he really still thinking of turning himself in?

In the end, then, Lafcadio will escape from the grasp of all that his family represents: heterosexuality, being loved and known, and the demands that he must give himself up to one authority or other, God or the police. But what can he escape to? The sounds of the city represent just a larger form of the encompassing network, the army a far more rigid structure of offices, disguises and laws.

Actually where Lafcadio was going to escape to is another novel. Gide is the real God of the text, of course. He is experimenting with both inviting and discarding the possibility of the lawless individual within the confines of a text. Lafcadio's role as perfect object to readers and characters of both sexes allows him to function as the catalyst which takes the normal into the anomalous. But he is shadowed by Protos, whose intellect outflanks desire and diagnoses his own intellect as too subject to vanity for the survival of the master criminal. Protos in his turn is entrapped by Gide's plot and it is this plot that, for sheer charm, the author allows Lafcadio to survive.

The character was meant to reappear in *Les Faux-monnayeurs* the next long fiction Gide wrote, and the only text he described as a novel, the genre that is, to quote its protagonist Édouard, of all literary genres, the freest, the most 'lawless'. With its last words 'I

am very curious to know Caloub, *Les Faux-monnayeurs* ends in the air, like *Les Caves du Vatican*, both hanging on the hook that will allow the next text to grow out of this one, and that hook is desire.

Paranoia in fiction is, then, like the gratuitous action, an impossibility. While characters flail, flounder or change their minds, the reader shares the author's last laugh. We know that in fiction, nothing escapes the mastery of the arch-plotter, and thus events that wound or harm the characters are mere comedy to us, nothing is irrevocable, and nothing is uncanny.

My second text was published two years before the first. It is a short story, the first extended narrative written by Kafka, and he wrote it, famously, in a single night and at one sitting. It is a story with only two characters, a father and a son, and it ends with an act of extraordinary self-inflicted violence: the father condemns the son to death by drowning and the son, precipitated by unconsidered obedience, runs out of the apartment, out of the building, down to the river and drowns himself. What, in the preceding pages, prepares us for this ending? How do we, as readers, rescue ourselves from the madness of assenting to this plot?

The story begins in typical realist fashion: *It was a beautiful Sunday morning in spring. Georg Bendemann, a young businessman, was sitting in his own room on the first floor of one of a long row of low, lightly-built houses.* Reassuringly, we are in the presence of facts about time, location, name and status. Georg has just got engaged and is worrying about how to break this to a friend of his who has emigrated to Russia, a sensitive, lonely young man whose feelings he does not want to hurt by announcing his success not only in his business life but now also in sexual and domestic matters. Now he has finally decided to write to him of his engagement. Before drafting the letter, Georg recollects a discussion he has had with his fiancée Frieda, in which she asked why the friend was unlikely to come to their wedding. Far from sympathising with his sensitivity to the other man, she commented: *'If you have friends like that, Georg, you should never have got engaged,* a remark which Georg laughs off and which leads to a bout of kissing.

Georg goes, with the letter in his pocket, to his father's room, which he has not entered for some months. It is dark and hot, with the curtains and window closed. Everything strikes Georg as pathetic and worrying, and he watches his father clearing away the breakfast things, aware of the decline in the old man: his poor sight, his mourning, his failure

to eat properly. Nevertheless, as his father got up to greet him, 'His heavy dressing-gown came open as he walked, the flaps fluttering around him: 'My father is still a giant of a man', thought Georg to himself'.

His father accuses him of lying. 'Have you really got this friend in St Petersburg?. Georg is embarrassed. 'Never mind my friends. A thousand friends could not take the place of my father'. He offers to swap bedrooms with the old man, says he will help his father into bed now and make him comfortable.

As he carries him across to the bed he sees, with a shock, that his father is playing with his watch-chain, clinging to it so tightly that at first he can't put him into the bed. But the father settles in, tucks the bed-clothes around him and looks up at his son. 'Am I well covered up?' he asks his son twice. Georg assures him he is.

Suddenly his father leaps up, saying No!, stands up on the bed with one hand lightly touching the ceiling, and shouts:

'You wanted to cover me up, I know that, my little rascal, but I'm not covered up yet. I still have some strength left, enough for you, too much for you! I know your friend all right. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you've been deceiving him all these years. Why else? Do you think I haven't wept over him? That's why you lock yourself in your office, not to be disturbed, the boss is busy – just so you can write your false little letters to Russia. But luckily no one can teach a father how to see through his son. And just when you thought you had got him well under, so well under that you plant your backside on him and he can't move, then my fine son decides to get married!'

Georg looks up at the 'nightmare vision of his father and thinks mournfully of his friend in St Petersburg, lost and lonely far away, standing abandoned outside his plundered business, just about able to stand up. 'Why had he had to go so far away?'

His father does a grotesque imitation of the fiancée lifting her skirts for him, and raises his nightshirt so high that Georg can see the war-wound on his thigh. He accuses him of besmirching 'the memory of our mother, betraying his friend and covering up his father, all for the sake of sexual gratification. 'And he stood up quite unsupported, kicking his legs. He was radiant with insight.'

He bends forward; he will fall, thinks Georg – and what if he shattered to pieces? Seeing the son does not approach, the father straightens himself. ,You think you still have the strength to come over here and you're just holding back because you choose to. Don't be so sure! I am still much stronger than you. His power is supplemented, he claims, by the strength of the dead mother, the loyalty of the friend in St Petersburg and the clients of their business. If Georg came towards him together with his bride, the father would knock her out of the way and get him.

To this he adds that he has been in touch with the friend in Russia, told him about the engagement long ago, has been writing to him for years. And with this, the father pronounces his judgment on the son: 'You were an innocent child it's true, but it's even more true that you were a devilish human being. And so hear what I have to say: I sentence you to death by drowning!

Georg 'felt himself driven out of the room, as he hears his father collapse with a crash on the bed; he rushes out of the flat, down the stairs, past the shocked maid, across the road, down to the river. The text ends:

Already he was grasping the railings as a hungry man reaches for food. He swung himself over, like the outstanding gymnast he had been in his youth, to his parents' pride. Still holding on, though his grip was getting weaker, he saw between the railings a motor-bus that would easily drown out the sound of his fall, called out softly: 'Dear parents, I did always love you', and let himself drop.

At that moment, a positively unending stream of traffic was passing over the bridge.

The violence of this suicidal ending is of course very present to any reader, and it undoes in the most radical way the calm reasonableness of the opening. A happy, successful man becomes a feeble, crazed oppressed child, obeying with no hesitation the grotesque sentence pronounced by his mad old father. Or is this what we experience?

I suggest that the reading process here consists of seeking a variety of ways to prevent the mad person from being ourselves, in other words to chase away the uncanny. To do this, we have to ask a series of questions, each of which leads to some solutions and some dead ends. The first obvious candidate for madness is Georg's father. His senility and aggression could explain the accusations, mockery and violence by which Georg is undermined. The father cannot bear the loss of his power, his redundancy at work and at

home, the death of his wife (whom he insists on referring to always as '*our* dear mother') and is cruelly mocked, he feels, by Georg's wish to marry and thus found a new family.

But the automatism of Georg's reaction, his alacrity to obey the judgment, seem excessive, beyond the level of guilt – his suicide, in other words, seems also to be a kind of revenge (remember the crash of his father's fall as he runs out of the room?) So is Georg the mad one after all? Why did his fiancée say that someone with friends like his should not get married?

The friend has by now, of course, become an uncanny element not only in relation to the father – whose many contradictory versions of him could be put down to weak memory or manipulation – but also to Georg, whose pity for him seemed so reasonable in the opening but later seems much more self-directed. *Does* the friend exist? And even if he does, is he not also an imaginary element whose place in the text is as a kind of thermometer for the developing craziness of the atmosphere?

More pointed in relation to Georg being the centre of madness is the changes in status and even physical form of his father. Within a few moments, the father is transformed from small enough to curl up in Georg's arms, playing with his watch-chain, to a man with the strength and height to stand up on a bed with one hand lightly touching the ceiling. Such shape-shifting must be attributed not to the old man himself but to the son who is, after all, the focaliser of the text, its central viewpoint. Changes in the size and form of the father would fit, also, into the particularly oedipal madness to which this young man seems subject. Accused of preferring his fiancée to his mother, he begins to feel the weakness that will eventually send him running down to the river. And his father's shifts from tiny to enormous, the fear of his falling, and his final crash as Georg rushes out, would all fit into a reading of the father as now-threatening, now-weakened phallus. This is, actually, anticipated on his entry into the father's room when Georg notices his weakness and self-neglect, but also, when seeing his dressing-gown flap open, observes: 'my father is still a giant of a man'.

This reading of the father as embodying the son's fear of replacing him in the phallic function would also explain the ending. Georg seems literally ejaculated forth as his father pronounces the sentence. As he shoots out from his father, the latter falls. He is precipitated down to the water where time seems to flow backwards, with a glimpse of a glowing youth, and then slipping back into a time *before* birth, with the two parents reunited in his last words. It is as if his disappearance were the only way to restore them to the pre-oedipal bliss of couplehood when there was no child. Thus he retraces the moment of his conception, he becomes again his father's sperm. And the final sentence contains an important pun: the

word 'Verkehr' (traffic), also has a number of other meanings, most importantly for this text, 'business' and 'intercourse'. As Georg dies in the water, his sacrifice is consummated by a 'positively unending stream' of other people's business, other people's fertility and desire.

This brings me to the third and main way out for the reader from experiencing the text as uncanny. Like *Les Caves du Vatican*, but in a different way, we can save ourselves from the madness and paranoia of this text by attributing those motives to its author. Kafka, we know, was obsessively intimidated by his bullish father. By creating a protagonist who obeys, beyond all reasonableness, the cruel condemnation of a senile father, he can express humility and aggression at a single stroke.

If, then, the old man, the young man, or the whole world of the fiction, attributed to its author's purposeful neurosis, can take the weight of the uncanny in this text, we emerge shaken but unscathed. We recognise the power of the effects, but we have 'read' them out, looking back, on a second reading, to find the exact moment when something started looking peculiar, or enjoying the metaphor of the closing paragraph or the pun in the last sentence.

Reading against realism, then, in both these texts, is a way of restoring for ourselves the safety of our world. It is away precisely of 'warding off' the anxiety of the potential uncanny of a work of art. When we have rearranged the pieces so as to trace a pattern in what (in life) might have been genuinely arbitrary bits, we are following the logic of intentionality. Whether conscious, as we take Gide's strategy to be, or unconscious, as we may wish to believe Kafka's to be, the patterns we choose to infer and gain assurance by assume the craft of authorship, and act for us as a talisman against the potential anxiety of art.