



Grey Room, Inc.

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Source: *Grey Room*, No. 21 (Fall, 2005), pp. 13-16

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442698>

Accessed: 29/12/2013 05:01

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Familiar Horror

PAOLO VIRNO

TRANSLATED BY ALESSIA RICCIARDI

To orient ourselves as best we can in the awful tangle of “roots,” it is convenient to interrogate a short essay by Freud, “The Uncanny.” In those pages is spelled out what is essential to the reclamation of origins (nation, ethnicity, cultural tradition, etc.) that from time to time grow wild in the postmodern metropolis.

Freud observes that the German word *heimlich* designates everything “belonging to the house” and communicates a sense of intimacy, “which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.”¹ The familiar trespasses on the uncanny; the protection also threatens; the sought-after root reveals a sinister nature. Trained in his mother tongue (Freud used the dictionary compiled by the Grimm brothers, the authors of the fairy tales that marvelously exemplify the dialectic of the *heimlich*), Freud interprets the terror that grips us in confronting the “uncanny” (of phantasms, for example) in terms of a traumatic reaction to the “familiar” that, unexpectedly, returns in disguise. The perceptual content of the ancient familiarity and the present horror is the same, with the exception that the idyll has become a nightmare.

The pairing *heimlich/unheimlich* (habitual/terrifying) may deserve a central place in the context of contemporary ethical reflection. To convince ourselves, it is enough to remember that the term *ethos* means nothing other than “habitualness.” If we entrust ourselves to the wisdom of etymology, ethics is not at all a form of life that is replete with “values” and with “dos and don’ts” but rather that enjoys the comfort of appropriate habits, intimately shared by the individual. Today, however, nothing is so paradoxical and eccentric—ultimately, *in-habitual*—as the claim to a solid habit that might, in all safety, direct gaze and action. Nothing sounds so fake. And so sinister. And so *uncanny*.

It is well known: the predominant passion of capitalist modernity has been to pull out all the roots one by one, destroying traditional communities and replacing habitualness with *repetition* (in fact, the repetition compulsion). In the blinding glow of technology and, in general, in the universalism of productive social forces, the shadowy paths of the *heimlich* disappear. Everything is well known but also extraneous, without secrets and yet

unforeseeable. Now, it is really in this irreversible condition of uprootedness that forms of atavistic belonging unexpectedly return as protective settlements, identities that resemble a destiny.

It would be a mistake to understand such regurgitation as a romantic resistance sustained by the supporters of a traditional order: of the latter there is no longer any direct memory. For a long time now, “modernization” revolutionizes only contexts of experience already characterized by conventions and artifice, already repeatedly transformed by sudden innovations. The claim to familiar roots is in itself hypermodern, as virulent as it is surreptitious. We are dealing with “blood and soil” in plastic, archaisms for the supermarket, and artificial origins. The *heimlich* that was returns as a mass-media pogrom, ethnic pride for spot ads, postindustrial subjection of bodies—which is to say, the *unheimlich*. Whoever tries to say homeland, community, authentic life, utters strident and terrifying cries worthy of a *revenant*. The mixture of the *familiar* and the *frightening* is by now systematic; we are still able to recognize the first only when we encounter the second.

Jean Améry (the pseudonym of Hans Mayer, an Austrian Jew who fled Belgium to escape the Nazis and then was captured, tortured, and deported to a *Lager*) dedicates a chapter to the question “How much home does a person need?” in his book *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*.² Where, it is necessary to make clear, the homeland is not the nation-state but rather the habitual place where we grew up, the *Heimat* (the substantive from which, in fact, the adjective *heimlich* derives).

In the space of a few pages, Améry traces an admirable phenomenology of exile. Uprooting is cruel in particular for those who are not religious (because piety is a second *Heimat* and, what’s more, portable) or who lack money (because money can procure completely new roots) or who do not enjoy great fame. Emigration in many ways resembles a premature aging process. It is the projection on a societal scale of the typical traits of the individual’s decline, starting with the feeling “of not being able to understand the world any longer.” (Incidentally, many pages in Améry’s book on old age, *Über des Altern*,³ are to be read as a complement to the chapter on the loss of *Heimat* in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*. And vice versa.) In Belgium, Améry suffers from an incurable “instability”: he cannot easily get his bearings in his environment and loses that instinctive ability to see clearly that alone can protect us from chance. In others’ gestures he proves unable to distinguish immediately the quiet indifference of an eventual threat; cultural rites performed under his eyes escape his attention, he does not grasp the references to a common background, and his sense of nuance atrophies.

The diagnosis of exile conducted by Améry corresponds very well to an

ordinary metropolitan experience (the author is aware of this), which is to say to the imbalance that continuous change in ways of working and communicating produces in the soul and in the senses. Especially today, dealing with a post-Fordist elasticity of employments and tasks, who can be said to be sure of him/herself and provided with foresight? Who can boast a web of protection from the blows of the new? For Améry, as a refugee, Belgium was extraneous; and extraneous as well is the metropolitan landscape, even for those who are used to it and would not know how to live elsewhere.

If exile impoverishes, the nostalgia for the supposed richness of the “origin” results in a chilling. On this score, Améry narrates an exemplary episode. In 1943, the author and his friends, who belonged to the resistance movement, frequented an apartment next to another occupied by some SS soldiers. “Well, one day it happened that the German living below our hiding place felt disturbed in his afternoon rest by our talk and our doings.” His uniform unbuttoned, his eyes reddened by sleep, the soldier did not try to investigate, but only to ask for quiet. And here comes the salient point:

He made his demand—and for me this was the truly frightening [*unheimlich*] part of the episode—in the dialect of my more immediate native region. I had not heard this accent for a long time, and for this reason there stirred within me the mad desire to answer him in his own dialect. I was in a paradoxical, almost perverse emotional state of trembling fear and, at the same time, surging intimate cordiality; for the fellow . . . appeared to me suddenly as a potential friend. Would it not be enough to address him in his, my language in order to then celebrate among regional patriotism and our reconciliation over a good bottle of wine?⁴

It is at that instant that Améry realizes once and for all the degree to which the feeling of *Heimat* is repugnant. Moreover, he understands that a familiar place has never existed and that to regret it is a self-destructive deception. (“[We made] journeys home with falsified papers and stolen pedigree!”⁵) Whoever is looking for roots sooner or later will be moved by the dialect of the SS soldier. This is the genre of commotion toward which anyone inclines who, in the contemporary metropolis, cultivates the dream of a miniature imaginary homeland that must be revived at any price.

It is better to stick to the ethical and sensory poverty implicit in exile or in social uprootedness rather than cherishing images of a “familiarity” charged with disquieting promises. However, there is a “but.” Notwithstanding all this, it is futile, and in the long run dangerous, to rid oneself with a shrug of the need for a familiar place. Améry knows this very well. Once all the traps of nostalgia have been avoided, “we are accustomed to living with things

that tell us stories,” to experiencing a sensual comfort in the face of our living environment.⁶

The game is played on a subtle brink. The comfort in question is a historical bet, not a guaranteed possession. A task we have ahead of ourselves, not an inheritance. Even better, it is an experience that can only spring out of an exile in Belgium or a completely metropolitan sense of dispossession. We have to mean by habit, which is to say by ethos, what is at the antipodes of “roots” and can be glimpsed only when their every trace has disappeared. But what is it, finally, this unoriginal, not presupposed, second-degree “habitualness”? Roughly speaking, this possibility more or less goes together with the ever-deferred actuality of what has been designated for two hundred years by the name *communism*.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 17, 1917–1919, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 222, 226.

2. Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Munich: Szczeny, 1966). Published in English as *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). All subsequent references are to the English edition.

3. Jean Améry, *Über das Altern: Revolte und Resignation* (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1968). Published in English as *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*, trans. John D. Barlow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

4. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 49.

5. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 51.

6. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 104.