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At home with a stranger

When Lytton Strachey turned his critical eye on the décor of 69 Lancaster Gate, the house in which he grew up, his account might be characterized (as I suggested in Chapter 5) as exhibiting an Oedipal shudder. There is a visceral quality to his distaste for his family home which is as much psychic as aesthetic. The incommensurability of the domestic interior as he describes it; its power as a player in, not just as a backdrop to, the internal dramas of its inhabitants; his inability to pin down its significance to him – this is an account in which Strachey expressly refuses the approach of his Victorian forebears to their environments. They were interested in the ‘mental and moral implications of their surroundings’, he wrote, so ‘their spirits, so noble and oblivious, escaped the direct pressure of the material universe’ (Strachey 1971: 16). Strachey, in contrast, is highly attuned to the aesthetics of his physical environment – his generation, he avers, ‘find satisfaction in curves and colours’ – but he also relishes the slide from the aesthetic to the psychic: ‘We are agitated by staircases, inspired by doors, disgusted by cornices’ (ibid.), he writes, and as the list progresses, the sense is less and less secure that his emotional reactions are only to the house’s artistic merits or deficits.

The impression that the looming distortions of the domestic interior are psychically as well as aesthetically disturbing and, as such, participate in the constitution of Strachey’s own interiority is reinforced when he recounts a recurrent dream he had about his childhood home, long after he had left it:

We are in the drawing-room, among the old furniture, arranged in the old way, and it is understood that we are to go there indefinitely, as if we had never left it. The strange thing is that, when I realize that this has come about, that our successive wanderings have been a mere interlude, that we are once more permanently established at number 69, a feeling of intimate satisfaction comes over me. I am positively delighted. And this is strange because, in my working life, I have never for a moment, so far

as I am aware, regretted our departure from that house, and if, in actuality, we *were* to return to it, I can imagine nothing which would disgust me more. So, when I wake up, and find myself after all at Gordon Square or Tidmarsh, I have the odd sensation of a tremendous relief at finding that my happiness of one second before was a delusion. (ibid.: 17)¹

Strachey's account pays nuanced attention to dream-detail, to the interplay of the waking and sleeping self, to the affects generated by the dream – delight, disgust, relief – all glossed with a commentary accentuating the strangeness of the mismatch between his unconscious and conscious associations with the family home. The account depends on an awareness of the limits of awareness, and thereby of the power of the unconscious, in adequately communicating that mismatch.

Strachey's attitude to his dream could not differ more starkly from that recounted by the domestic sanitarian doctor Benjamin Ward Richardson and discussed in Chapter 3. Richardson's dream of the fictional island castaway Philip Quarrrl – avowedly a dream of solitude and desolation, perhaps also of autonomy and abandonment – leads him not to insights about the state of his own psyche, but to the imperfectly dried and decomposing feathers of his pillow which were giving him an oppressive headache and nausea. For Richardson, his dream was a kind of *roman à clef*, its singular and simple meaning borne in the direct and closed correspondence between the dream pillow and his own, and thus readily available for extraction and application. For Strachey, in contrast, his dream was an open, enigmatic and supercharged text, a generator and bearer of feeling as much as meaning.

Between the accounts of the two dreams lie some forty years and – among other things – the transformative interventions of Sigmund Freud, after which no dream could ever again be approached with Richardson's literal-minded pragmatism. Strachey was familiar with Freud's work – his brother James was an early analysand of Freud and became the general editor of the English translations of his works – but by the 1920s psychoanalytic ideas were also starting to permeate, albeit in a simplified and popularized form, the wider culture. In Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), reputedly the first novel actively to engage with psychoanalysis, the Freudian doctor describes the premises of this new theory:

The mental life that can be controlled by effort isn't the mental life that matters. You've been stuffed up when you were young with talk about a thing called self-control – a sort of barmaid of the soul that says, 'Time's up, gentlemen,' and 'Here, you've had enough.' There's no such thing. There's a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes. And if those wishes are suppressed by the superficial self – the self that makes, as

you say, efforts and usually makes them with the sole idea of putting up a good show before the neighbours – it takes its revenge. Into the house of conduct erected by the superficial self it sends an obsession. ([1918] 1980: 163–4)

The doctor describes the ego-cum-superego as a householder dwelling in a 'house of conduct' and anxious about the neighbours' disapproval.² The internal dramas of the conflicted self are translated into a series of commonplace domestic and neighbourhood analogues.

The domestic parallel is found too in psychoanalytic writings. At the margins (and psychoanalysis is particularly interested in the ill-defined territories of the margin: the dream half-remembered, the feeling barely registered, the slip of the tongue corrected before it is completed), Freud, like Strachey, paid serious attention to the psychic dimensions of the domestic environment in at least two ways. First, as well as being detective stories, his case histories are also family melodramas, played out in the claustrophobic interiors and public spaces of the European middle classes. If the Victorian sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is susceptible to a psychoanalytic reading, Freud's case history 'Dora' (Freud [1905] 1977) is equally legible as a melodrama. It is a tale of sexual intrigue, forbidden love, jealousy, loyalty and betrayal, involving a coercive father, secret mistress, angry daughter, depressed and deceived mother and sexually knowing governess, all generated in a matrix of tumultuous and ambivalent emotions. Such melodramas do not unfold in a social or material vacuum, but in domestic environments whose structure, equipment and familial usage not only stage them but also shape them.

Secondly, when Freud sought to capture the unsettling admixture of familiarity and strangeness by which people periodically find themselves ambushed – when we glimpse ourselves in a mirror, for example, and take a moment to realize the image is ours, or when we experience a sense of déjà vu – the term he used is *unheimlich*, translated as 'uncanny' but literally meaning 'unhomely' (Freud [1919] 1985). The uncanny describes a phenomenon or experience whose identity, apparently commonplace and stable, is suddenly revealed to be something quite different. The material environment and the psyche collide with each other: one thing collapses into another, the other is revealed to be the self, the present shows itself to be the past. The unconscious, that is, momentarily appropriates and animates a face, an object or a place, rendering strange the familiar and unsettling the sense of the everyday as given, knowable and dependable.

The home itself, as Freud's case histories and those of his psychoanalytic colleagues demonstrate repeatedly, shares this doubled identity. As Strachey's dream account shows so concisely, home is at once the place to which we yearn to return and from which we long to escape. It is material, bricks and

mortar, but also psychic, fabricated of the disturbing and unsettling as well as the comfortable and safe, of loneliness and alienation as well as filiation and intimacy, of the casual unkindnesses and sometimes cruelties of those we love as well as their care and nurturance. The uncanny is only unhomely in its refusal to conform to anodyne, ameliorative and consolatory fictions of the meanings of home. In its capacity to be its own opposite, in its compaction of strangeness and familiarity, comfort and unease, a sense of safety and of threat – the movement from one term to the other registered in a momentary visceral jolt of disturbance – the uncanny is as homely a phenomenon as can be imagined.

If our homes are at times as odd and unnerving as Strachey's dream rendered his, how much stranger are their inhabitants – not (or not only) in their being unusual, but rather in their gradually revealed unfamiliarity and unknowability. The pervasiveness of transference – the process whereby 'we all invent each other according to early blueprints' – means that our encounters with others are inevitably 'a messy jangle of misapprehensions, at best an uneasy truce between powerful solitary fantasy systems' (Malcolm [1981] 2004: 6). In short, as Janet Malcolm concludes her summary of Freud's concept, 'we cannot know each other. We must grope around for each other through a dense thicket of absent others. We cannot see each other plain' (*ibid.*). Owing to transference, our personal relationships are as much encounters with ourselves as with other people, and the others we do engage with are not even present, but revenants from our pasts. If others remain strangers to us, so too, according to Freud, do our unconscious render us strangers to ourselves, putting our behaviour, motivations, desires and anxieties beyond the constraining grip of understanding, reason and will.³ Georg Groddeck, Freud's contemporary in the field of psychoanalysis, made this observation most starkly and simply: 'One goes through life without knowing the tiniest thing about oneself' ([1923] 1949: 196). How strange our relationships with those closest to us – our parents, siblings and friends, our spouses and children – will prove to be, therefore, as the imperfectly known self encounters a misrecognized other. As well as bequeathing the twentieth century a body of analytic theory, a series of techniques for accessing the unconscious, therefore, Freud also left a sense of the home as a profoundly transformed environment: more ambiguous, but also with more to tell, of more import, than previously, its strangeness compounded by the familiar and intimate strangers dwelling within it.

What might happen when the kind of critical scrutiny of the home exemplified by Strachey, where it is less an expression of its inhabitants and more an extension of them, meets with the sense that those with whom we share our houses, lives and most intimate relationships must always, inevitably, remain opaque to us, and elude our cognition? Might this combination help to

make sense of the brief flowering of the twentieth-century predilection for twin beds? Might the married couple of the twentieth century, an intimate and enduring pairing of two people destined to remain strangers to themselves and to each other, require a domestic *mise-en-scène* that takes figurative account of the notion that a marriage is founded not so much in mutual recognition but in its impossibility? As the protagonist puts it in Elizabeth Taylor's *A Game of Hide and Seek*, marriage comes to seem 'a frayed, tangled thing made by two strangers ... [It] does not solve mysteries ... It creates and deepens them ([1951] 2009: 147, 146). If this was an increasingly commonly held perception, might it not also be the case that domestic life found commensurate material forms? Perhaps twin beds' formal reconfiguration of the sleeping pair as always and necessarily both together and apart might be understood as a material manifestation of a new cultural inflection of the married couple, expressive not only of new political agendas about marriage and gender (the New Woman, suffrage campaigns, law and marriage reform) but also of the insights deriving from the emerging disciplines of psychoanalysis and sociology. Indeed, Groddeck's interest in psychoanalysis was precipitated by his recognition that 'I have never felt that anyone was not a stranger to me' ([1923] 1949: 197). The perception was shared by his contemporary, the founding sociologist Georg Simmel, who suggested not only that 'a trace of strangeness ... enters even the most intimate relationships', but also that there was a 'unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation' ([1908] 1950: 406,402). Psychology and sociology: two of the new disciplines shaping twentieth-century understandings of what it meant to be a modern subject, seeking their meanings on the one hand in internal psychic structures and on the other in wider social ones, found themselves required to acknowledge, confront, work with and account for the intimate strangers whom their investigations delivered up to them. Twin beds might therefore be framed as a social phenomenon with both psychic analogues and cultural reverberations.

It was not only in arcane medical and academic discourse that such psychoanalytically informed perceptions were to be found. The impact of a popularized Freudianism, in particular, was such that these ways of thinking filtered into the broader culture, not only of those moving in the circles of the modernist intelligentsia such as Lytton Strachey and Rebecca West, but also into middle-class culture – the main milieu in which twin beds were adopted. Even a light-hearted handbook on marriage entitled *Bed Manners* started from the premise of the inherent strangeness of the marital encounter: 'The strangest adventure of all is to find yourself locked in a bedroom with a person of the opposite sex, with whom you are required to go to bed and get up for thousands and thousands of nights. This is called "marriage"' (Hopton and Balliol 1936: 16).⁴ The rest of the book suggests how best to navigate – and survive – these nightly close encounters with a stranger.

In middlebrow, middle-class culture, marriages were frequently anatomized and differing configurations of marital closeness and remoteness were tested and renegotiated, celebrated or destabilized. In *Mrs Miniver* (1939), for example, a novel by Jan Struther that began life as a series of popular columns in the *Times* and was later made into a Hollywood film, the eponymous heroine, the epitome of middle-class intelligence and good sense (though now in danger of appearing insufferably self-satisfied), reflects on the mysteries of marriage, especially her own, to Clem. The two of them have, she notes, a different approach to the expression of their feelings:

Whereas words, for her, clarified feelings, for Clem, on the whole, they obscured them. This was perhaps just as well. For if they had both been equally explicit they might have been in danger of understanding each other completely; and a certain degree of un-understanding (not mis–, but un–) is the only possible sanctuary which one human being can offer to another in the midst of the devastating intimacy of a happy marriage. (Struther [1939] 1989: 39–40)

A happy marriage is characterized by its ‘devastating’ intimacy. What is it that intimacy ‘devastates’, or to which it lays waste?⁵ Why might a happy marriage be particularly vulnerable? A partial answer lies in the suggestion that too much consciously articulated understanding in a marriage is perilous. In contrast, a degree of ‘un-understanding’, a benign mental space apart, is a sanctuary gifted by one spouse to the other. Such a space – unconscious, unelaborated, inchoate – is a refuge, perhaps, from the more acute demands made by the twentieth-century ideal of the much discussed companionate marriage, whereby husbands and wives were increasingly exhorted to be all in all to each other, not only committed spouses and parents, but also best friends and enduringly passionate lovers.⁶ The expectations generated by the all-encompassing demands of twenty-four-hour companionship, *Mrs Miniver* suggests, need to be offset by, at the very least, a psychic room of one’s own.

Mrs Miniver also suggests that intimacy is much more than just emotional or relational. It is also material and environmental. Arriving home after a holiday, she notices how ‘the key turned sweetly in the lock. That was the kind of thing one remembered about a house: not the size of the rooms or the colour of the walls, but the feel of door-handles and light-switches, the shape and texture of the banister-rail under one’s palm; minute tactual intimacies, whose resumption was the essence of coming home’ (ibid.: 2). For *Mrs Miniver*, the intimacy and familiarity of the home is tactile as well as emotional. It is to be found not only in the conjugal and familial affiliations that play out within its walls, but also in the barely observed relationships that one develops with the materials making up the fabric of that home – those ‘minute

tactual intimacies' generated by the contact between skin and metal or wood or Bakelite. And it is these, Mrs Miniver suggests, that capture and conjure the essential meaning of home.

So what happens when Mrs Miniver's two observations meet – that is, the need for a personal space as a refuge from the 'devastating intimacy' of a happy marriage and the recognition of the capacity of inanimate domestic objects to be powerful generators and mediators of intimacy? She imagines the emotional intimacy of the married couple as itself spatial, a Venn diagram with a balance between shared and private spaces and resources: 'She saw every relationship as a pair of intersecting circles. The more they intersected, it would seem at first glance, the better the relationship; but this is not so. Beyond a certain point the law of diminishing returns sets in, and there aren't enough private resources left on either side to enrich the life that is shared' (ibid.: 40). Too much overlap, Mrs Miniver notes elsewhere, can result in married couples 'turning into Siamese twins' (ibid.: 47) – an unfortunate term of its time which nonetheless conveys her sense that such a marriage represents an unhealthy and unnatural kind of marital conjoining. The problem, she thinks, is that 'a single person is a manageable entity ... But half of a married couple is not exactly a whole human being' (ibid.). A finely judged combination of being together and being apart, of closeness and distance, is needed to negotiate this phenomenon.

In the Miniver marital bedroom, this perceived necessity of a balance between privacy and intimacy is substantiated in Kay and Clem's twin beds. These are glimpsed in the novel when the children come into their parents' bedroom on Christmas morning. The younger two climb into their mother's bed, while their older brother 'curled himself up on the foot of his father's bed' (ibid.: 17). This Christmas scene offers the novel's sole entrée into the marital bedroom of Clem and Kay, where it epitomizes the text's idealizing vision of family life. In the Hollywood film adaptation (1942: dir. William Wyler), however, the Minivers' bedroom becomes centrally important. It emerges as the shared space at the heart of the home, and cements the image of the marriage as untroubled, companionable, but also intimate, the *mise-en-scène* for the sometimes humorous, sometimes flirtatious, sometimes nurturing exchanges between husband and wife. Twin beds are here a long way from being the sign of a disappointing marriage, the position they later assumed in the symbolic geography of the marital bedroom. Rather, their beds serve as the furnishing equivalent of the intersecting circles imagined by Mrs Miniver. They are together, always a pair, always close by, but also apart, their separateness leaving in place a reservoir of privacy as a sanctuary from the devastating intimacy of happy togetherness.

In neither novel nor film is the 'devastating intimacy' of the Minivers' happy marriage ever shaken. The enduring balance between un-understanding and

intimacy renders this fictional union either a backdrop to social comedy or a source of commonplace wisdoms. More compelling, perhaps, because more ambivalent, is the anatomization of a middle-class marriage to all appearances very similar to that of the *Minivers* but where its equilibrium is profoundly shaken, in the classic British romance film *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean; 1945). Here, the marriage of Laura and Fred is destabilized not by a flaw inherent in its own conjugal fabric, unless that flaw be the insufficient cultivation of 'un-understanding' between the spouses, but by the devastating intimacy of an affair, when Laura falls in love with Alec, a doctor she meets in the station tea-room. At a crucial narrative juncture, in the midst of the crisis that the affair precipitates for Laura, her assumptions about the proper distribution of knowing and unknowing, of nearness and remoteness, are played out across the gulf between the couple's twin beds.

In this scene Laura lies in bed, wakeful and restless. The voiceover confirms what the audience already knows: Laura is ashamed of the lie she has told Fred to conceal the fact that she had spent the afternoon with Alec. Laura turns and looks across at Fred as he sleeps untroubled in his own twin bed, separated from hers by a bedside table (Figure 23). Her gaze takes in the table, on which sit two objects implicated in Laura's emotional drama. The first is a book: she had first met Alec on a day when she had changed her library

FIGURE 23 *Twin beds in Brief Encounter (1945).*

book at Boot's. The second is a telephone, the instrument with which Laura had that evening compounded her lie by seeking its false corroboration by her friend. Together, these two objects, positioned between Laura and Fred, serve as reminders of the innocent beginning of her romance with Alec and of its latest all-too-guilty staging post.

The scene is accompanied by Rachmaninov's second piano concerto, music 'by turns turbulent, yearning and mournful' (Dyer 1993: 17) and a marker of Laura's tumultuous and disordered emotional state, as well as by the voiceover. The voice is Laura's, her words addressed to Fred as she reflects on the now-ended affair. This has shaken her to the core through its unloosing of an overwhelming desire for the intimacy and intensity of romantic passion, while also leaving intact both her love for Fred and the children and her attachment to decency, loyalty and self-respect, the values of her milieu. Looking across to Fred, asleep in his twin bed, with a perspective afforded by the distance between them, her voiceover recalls, 'That week was misery. I went through it in a sort of trance. How odd of you not to have noticed that you were living with a stranger in the house.' This reflection accompanies a shot of the two of them side by side in their twin beds. Laura's gaze traverses the gap between the beds; it addresses Fred, just as her words do. The sleeping Fred, facing Laura, is oblivious to her anguish. The voiceover identifies Laura as the stranger in the house – somebody unknown to him, an interloper in the sanctuary of the home, the marital bedroom, the parallel bed – yet unrecognized as such by Fred.

Perhaps worse, however, Laura is also a stranger to herself. She is horrified at her own resourceful dishonesty in telling her lie to Fred, a duplicity made literal in her doubled presence in the preceding scene, where she is filmed from behind as she sits at her dressing table talking to Fred, her face seen only in the mirror. The successful accomplishment of the first lie precipitates the need for a second – the story given to her friend on the telephone. The stricken looks on Laura's face after the telling of each lie suggest her revulsion at her facility with these falsehoods, her ability to breach her own moral code with such inventiveness and ease. It is not her affair with Alec that has made her unfamiliar to herself, but the telling of her easy and expert lies which marks the beginning of her shame, guilt and fear.

But if she is a stranger to Fred and to herself, the scene shows Fred to be a stranger to her too, closed to her as he sleeps just as he is – albeit in a benign and affable way – when awake. 'Hi, Laura – you were miles away!', he says to her as they sit in the drawing room, recalling her from her reverie but showing no concern for where it might have taken her. The affair with Alec takes place in the space opened up by Fred's distance from her. Early on, when Laura suggests inviting Alec and his wife to dinner, Fred's response is 'Must it be dinner?', preferring it to be lunch because he is never at home then.

Throughout, his calls on Laura concern the children or his dinner, or he asks for assistance with his crossword. Laura's interiority, made present in the film by the voiceover and by the many close-ups of her face and, in particular, her eyes (windows if not to her soul, then at least to her heart), is in stark contrast to Fred's resolute exteriority, his refusal to engage with Laura in any way that might demand his emotional presence: 'Have it your own way!', he says to her on three occasions, ducking the possibility of any difference of opinion. He remains at an emotional distance from her until the final scene when, Laura and Alec having separated, putting a geographical gulf between them of the magnitude necessary to keep them apart (Alec emigrates to South Africa), Laura returns to the family home and to Fred. Now, finally, against all the evidence, Fred shows that he has been aware all along of Laura's unhappiness and distance from him. 'You've been a long way away', he says; 'thank you for coming back to me'. This scene, quite at odds with the bluff and cheerfully oblivious persona he has inhabited hitherto, may return him to Laura as an observant and caring husband, but it nonetheless leaves him for the audience as a new kind of stranger in the house, one introduced by the *volte face* in his capacity for observation, delicacy and intimacy.

Brief Encounter offers nothing as straightforward as a contrast between an emotionally distant if companionable marriage and the intensity of a love affair. Intimacy, proximity and distance are triangulated across the two relationships. They are configured, on the one hand, across the gulf at the heart of the marriage of two strangers, and on the other by the bridge formed by the passionate intensity of the affair between two other strangers: 'I hardly know him at all really', comments Laura of Alec after they have finally gone their separate ways. Twin beds preserve Laura and Fred as a pair, but also maintain them as separate people. Suspending them somewhere between the merged form of the married couple and the self-sufficiency and autonomy of two individuals, the couple are simultaneously together and apart, the tension between the two terms generated by the contrary dynamics which hold the couple in place.

The troubled marriage of Laura and Fred and the happy one of Kay and Clem Miniver are both staged against the backdrop of a pair of twin beds which introduces the balanced distribution of distance and intimacy appropriate for the marriages of two strangers. The space between the two beds makes literal the space at the heart of each couple, a space that can serve as boundary or as bridge, which can separate or connect, facilitate either the inclusive gaze or the oblivious unknowing of fellow sleepers. In Kay Miniver's terms, twin beds could be said to introduce the ambiguous but necessary space of un-understanding.

If fictional marriages, with their privileged *mise-en-scène* of interiority and affiliation, can accommodate the space between in this way, what happens

to it in other discourses of modern marriage? In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, as twin beds appeared in the shops, as the figure of the fashionable New Woman campaigning for social reform increasingly refused the terms of a marriage forged in the separate spheres of husband and wife, how did new thinking about the proper relation of the married couple conceptualize and negotiate that space? And in what ways did such thinking interpret, deploy or refuse its respatialization of the marital bedroom, in the fashionable and popular twin bedsteads?