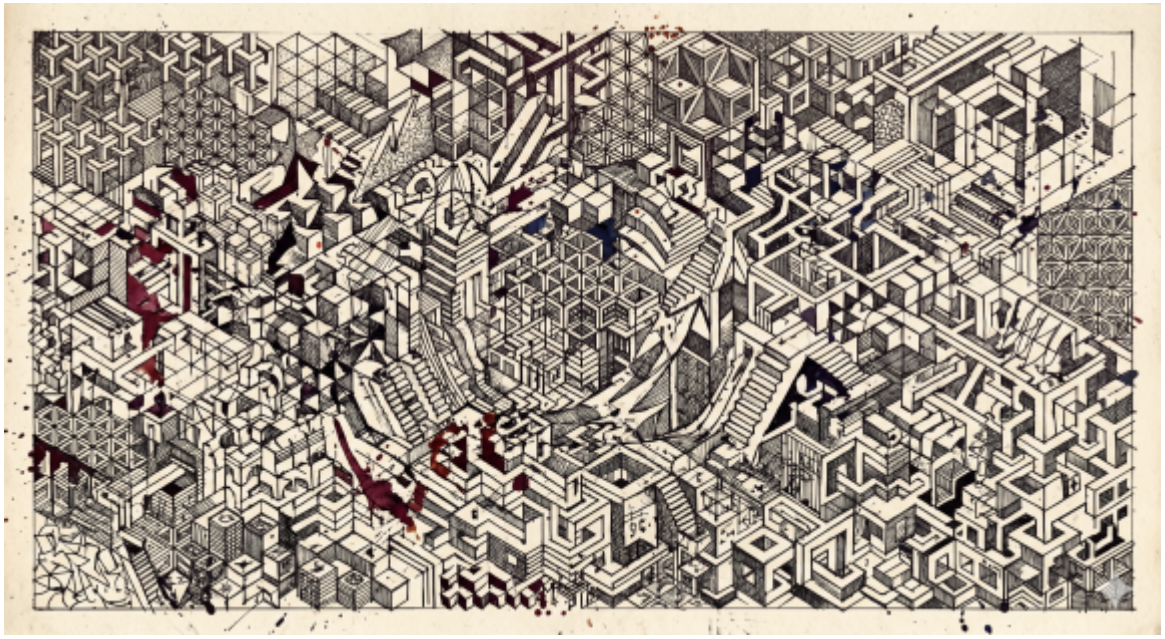
Day 21: Repetition Compulsion



In Theory: One of Sigmund Freud's most enduring clinical observations is that patterns repeat, not deliberately or consciously, but with regularity that can span years and contexts. Within classical psychodynamic theory, early emotional experience tends to be recreated in later relationships, in altered form but with a familiar structure. Similar dynamics appear with different people, yet the underlying pattern persists. Individuals may find themselves drawn toward situations that echo earlier emotional conditions or acting in ways that contribute to expected outcomes. Freud described this as repetition compulsion, demonstrating that what cannot yet be remembered or fully processed is often repeated. This traps the individual within a familiar script, turning the social world into a theater where the unresolved conflicts of the past are perpetually re-enacted.

In Experience: Someone raised with an emotionally unavailable parent finds themselves drawn to others who are initially present and then become distant. Each time there is an initial sense of possibility. The pattern does not remain fixed in form, but its shape can repeat across different contexts. Similar repetitions can appear beyond relationships, in choices, or in the way certain situations are approached.

In Thought: A repeated pattern may point to something unresolved. The pattern may continue to shape experience in ways that are not immediately visible.

In Print: Phillips, A. *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (1993)

In Attention: Notice a pattern that has repeated across different circumstances.