

THE CONTEMPORARY GHOST

by Edith Ronald Mirrielees

READERS who contrast the short stories published in any set of English or American magazines during the early decades of the twentieth century with those published in the nineteenth century can hardly fail to observe in them one striking phenomenon. That is the phenomenon of the story's increased and changed use of the supernatural.

In the nineteenth century, of course, as in every century preceding it, the supernatural held an important place, but in dealing with it nineteenth-century writers had, in general, two habits sharply at variance with present ones. One of these was the habit of substituting the semblance of ghostliness for the actuality; the other the exaltation of man at the expense of ghost. As most present-day readers were brought up on nineteenth-century stories—Hawthorne's, for example, and Poe's—and have made the change to Machen and Blackwood and the rest without conscious analysis, it is worth while to look a little at each of these habits, partly for its own sake but still more for the curious implications involved in its abandonment.

Both Hawthorne and Poe (using the two as representatives of their age) write stories packed with supernatural feeling. With both, supernatural happening is of the rarest. Choosing almost at random among the better known of Poe's stories—"The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Berenice" or "Premature Burial"—the reader finds any one of the

three clammy with ghostly sensation, and yet, in all three together, no incident but refers itself straight back to so-called natural causes. Drugs, insanity, delirium, nightmare—these are the demoniac powers that drive the characters. And each of these is a power conceived in man's act and brought to birth in his own brain.

In Hawthorne's stories the driving forces are, indeed, different from those used by Poe, but the reluctance to infringe upon extramundane territory is the same. Time after time Hawthorne lays his hand upon the curtain which hides an unseen world—and snatches the hand hastily away again, protesting that the curtain has not parted. In "The Minister's Black Veil" a dead girl stirs and shivers beneath the hero's gaze—but only a discredited witness is permitted to record the happening. Esther Dudley's childish guests see stately figures moving in the halls of the empty manor house—but none but children see the figures and they report the marvel doubtfully. Other examples might be quoted in numbers from either source. With a zeal worthy of the first great era of the natural sciences, these two, creators, each in his own fashion, of the "new shudder" for their generation, are intent on assigning to that shudder a natural origin.

Now and then, however, the undeniable supernatural does slip inside their pages. When it does, with either of them, it comes always in one established relationship. It

comes, that is, as the subordinate of man. Its appearance is dependent upon man's performance. William Wilson, quailing before his spectre double, has yet drawn that double to him by his own act. The Grey Champion, when he leaves his grave, leaves it in answer to the challenge of British tyranny. Human crime or suffering—human will, at least—is always needed, whether to rouse the lethargic dead or to center for a moment the attention of unearthly powers. Except when so roused, unearthly powers are powers withdrawn, uninterfering, and very far away.

In the contemporary story, on the other hand, unearthly powers are closely within reach. No magic preparation, no incantation is needed to procure their presence. The supernatural, the unexplainable, bumps against the natural at every turn. In the nineteenth century Faust summoned his devil; in the twentieth his devil quite as often summons Faust.

The difference here is deep-reaching. It indicates an attitude of mind on the part of both writer and reader almost incredibly altered from that of the century just gone. The nature of the alteration may perhaps best be emphasized by reference to two stories of similar theme appearing a scant generation apart.

In 1859 FitzJames O'Brien, standing at the latter edge of the Poe-Hawthorne epoch, published a story, "What Was It?", wherein an invisible opponent, a being with weight and bulk and muscular activity, sensible to touch but not to sight, drops suddenly from nowhere on the hero and strives to kill him. In 1891, Ambrose Bierce, as always well in the forefront of his time, produced the history of another invisible attacker—animal this time—"That Damned Thing". The two are in essence the same—two of the best horror stories in the language. Bierce's stands stark. The beast comes from nowhere, comes for no known reason, comes again and again at will, leaves finally its unoffending prey dead

and mutilated behind it. O'Brien in the fifties cannot have it so. In the somewhat bungling introduction to a remarkable story, he provides first a crime and a suicide to cast their baleful influence over the place where the attack occurs; second, a dabbling in things psychic on the part of the hero to give a reason for his being the monster's special victim.

In the century just past, that is, the hero had himself to open the door to his assailant. Now the hero no longer has to open the door; he cannot even hold it shut.

"That Damned Thing" is forerunner of a host of stories wherein initiative for mysterious adventure lies neither with the hero nor with his friends or enemies or any human agent. In "Confession," by Algernon Blackwood, for example, a convalescent soldier, lost in London fog, meets a wistful lady who leads him home to the house where she lies stabbed to death above-stairs. Has the man thus brought known the woman or known her killer or had, in thought or in fact, any parallel adventure? No, to all three questions. He has not even stumbled on the place by chance to give the long established "place-ghost" its opportunity. Nor does the action of the apparition bring down vengeance on anybody or explain anything or affect the ultimate fate of any of the characters. The unhappy soldier comes—and goes again, awed and shaken, as bewildered and purposeless as the shade itself. In Perceval Gibbon's story, "The Dark Ride", the Countess of Marydéan strolling home through pleasant English twilight is suddenly lifted out of her own prosperous life and set down in another sordid and dangerous one—and a little later is as inexplicably lifted back into her own. Conrad, in one of the passages of "Heart of Darkness", makes the teller of the story say of his recurrent fevers, "I had often a little fever then, the playful pawstrokes of the wilderness". So with this present phase of the supernatural. A playful pawstroke—and the chance recipient goes on, shuddering. The Thing is there.

This sense of the crouching Thing, invisible but present on the edge of life, is perhaps the strongest feeling developed by stories like those just quoted. Some idle movement, some restless yawning of the great jaws, betrays the presence to a watcher not even dignified by having been chosen for the exhibition, only chancing to pass by when the movement was being made. Why should one respectable, entirely disconnected pedestrian rather than another—as in “Accessory Before the Fact”—be made by supernatural action the unwilling participant in crime? Well, on the other hand—why not? Why should lightning destroy A’s house and not B’s? The present ghostly appearance in fiction has in it something of the waywardness of a natural force—has more than the waywardness of a natural force; there are no lightning-rods against the supernal stroke.

This absence of the lightning-rod it is which furnishes, on the whole, the most surprising aspect of a general change. In nineteenth-century fiction, as written either in England or in America, it was not initiative only which belonged to man. Because of his possession of initiative, moral responsibility also was uniformly his. And because of moral responsibility, righteousness, if he had it, was his shield and buckler. Till 1880 or thereabouts the pure in heart, with whatever alarms, were finally safe from ghostly molestation. Since 1880 they are safe no longer.

For this failure of the controlling power of human goodness, two stories a generation apart again provide an illustration: “Circumstance”, by Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Kipling’s “At the End of the Passage”. In “Circumstance”, the heroine is bent upon an errand of mercy and is herself of noble character. The ghostly shroud which weaves across her path, though it may startle the reader of the sixties, need not therefore seriously concern him. Her goodness is as effective as a guard of angels. On the other hand, Hummil, in “At the End of the Passage”, is quite as much bent on mercy when the

powers of darkness make their mysterious attempt upon him. It is his performance of an act of moral heroism which keeps him within reach of the assault—and yet the assault is successful.

Hummil would have been impossible in the time of Harriet Prescott Spofford. At that period he must of necessity have contributed in some fashion to his own doom. Even in the eighties he was still a sole experiment in Kipling’s repertoire. “The Phantom Rickshaw”, “The Return of Imray”, “The Courting of Dinah Shadd”, come all from the more familiar mould.

Once we top the rise into the twentieth century, however, companions for Hummil appear in numbers. This does not mean, of course, that there do not exist plenty of present-day stories which allow for virtue as a protection from supernatural attack or for guilt as a cause of harm. Stories will probably always exist wherein, as in “William Wilson”, human act and ghostly penalty bear an immediate connection. Stories will always exist where innocence wards off destruction. What the new appearance does mean is that this connection, once inevitable, a necessity springing from fundamental conceptions of both reader and writer, is inevitable no longer. The number increases yearly of stories where action is carried out from first to last without regard to the kind of moral nature possessed by the human being caught up, through chance or purpose, into the midst of supernatural movement. Yearly also the Other Kingdom shown in those stories impinges more closely on our own external one. With Hawthorne, it was pulsing in man’s brain; today it is jostling his elbows.

Something, that is, has happened to human imagination, as something happened to it at the opening of the Renaissance, when free will entered into fiction. For four hundred years, from mariner’s compass to airplane, free will has enlarged its dominion—and now its dominion is threatened. The nineteenth-century mortal, so far as nineteenth-

century fiction shows, entertained now and then a ghostly visitant in his own world, himself host and summoner of that visitant. The twentieth-century mortal camps at suffering on the stoop of a world crowded with extra-mortal beings he cannot banish if he would. The reader who explores among the supernatural stories of these latest decades must again and again look to the ghost, not to the man, for the definite cause of action.

That such exploring was at first doubtful and tentative is evidenced by the reception accorded the earlier stories wherein supernatural phenomena escaped their accustomed rôles. The long familiar "remorse ghost" of Kipling's "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" was much more valued by his immediate contemporaries than were the lovely, wilful phantoms caught in the pages of "They". Henry James, in the most tremendous ghost story in the language, so puzzled critics by the freedom allowed his disembodied criminals that several took refuge in denying that there were ghosts in the story at all.

As story followed story, however, understanding advanced. Readers' imaginations pawed themselves free, like Milton's lion out of the earth. At present seemingly no imagi-

native difficulty is found in stories placing initiative and therefore moral responsibility with the ghost; no difficulty is found in stories allowing for a close-pressing spectral universe, either immediately imposed upon our own or penetrating it as ether was once supposed to penetrate air.

Celtic eyes have frequently seen our world in something this double fashion. To the eyes of English-speaking peoples the sight is new, for English fiction has consistently emphasized the moral. And for moral evaluation man must hold the supreme place; it cannot be ceded. Once admit of bodiless beings moving about him on concerns of their own, affecting him more than they are affected by him, and the question of the rightness or wrongness of his conduct suffers inevitably a diminished importance.

What the effect will be of this diminished importance, whether the long habit of moral evaluation will presently reassert itself, or, if it does not, how far altered habit of mind must display itself in altered action, above all why such alteration appears at this particular point in time—these are enticing questions, but questions to which the final answers must come not from onlookers but from backward-lookers.

JOHN RUSKIN: DUST AND STAR

by John Macy

WHEN Ruskin was fifty-five he published *Frondees Agrestes*, brief selections by a friend from the early voluminous *Modern Painters*, with a few mature self-critical notes. This small volume contains the gist of the younger Ruskin and the notes show the change that had come over the older. Before he was thirty he had written that "the man who has no invention is always setting things in order, and putting the world to rights, and mending, and beautifying, and pluming himself on his doings as supreme in all ways". In his foot-note he says: "I am now a comic illustration of this sentence, myself. I have not a ray of invention in all my brains; but am intensely rational and orderly, and have begun to set the world to rights". For all his arrogance of opinion Ruskin was usually modest in scrutinizing himself. Another note is not so much an avowal as a betrayal of a limitation. He had placed Scott above all other literary men of Europe, "in an age which has produced Balzac and Goethe". The middle-aged commentator adds: "I knew nothing of Goethe when I put him with Balzac; but the intolerable dullness which encumbers the depth of *Wilhelm Meister*, and the cruel reserve which conceals from all but the intensest readers the meaning of *Faust*, have made him . . . an evil influence in European literature; and Evil is always second-rate". Who but Ruskin, or perhaps Tolstoy, could have thought of Goethe as an evil influence?

The trouble lies in the devoutly capitalized word, Evil. From his brilliant youth to the end of his active career, Ruskin was obsessed and impeded, as well as inspired, by moralistic motives, by the corrupting indignation of the reformer forever seeking irrelevant virtues and finding impertinent vices. This ethical zeal carries him by straight logic of character through the crisis which, when he was forty, seems to divide his work into two parts but really does not break it sharply. Significantly, the two most influential preachers in Victorian literature, Carlyle and Ruskin, were Scots, Calvinistic Covenanters, with much more than "something of the Shorter-Catechist". Whatever their intellectual development or change of belief, they never outgrew the traditions of their childhood, their blood and breeding, and they were hindered as well as strengthened by those traditions, though both in some measure worked free from them. Ruskin was born in London, but that accident of place no more made him an Englishman than Swift's nativity in Dublin made him an Irishman; the Ruskin family in all traceable lines was thoroughly Scottish. Without pushing too far conjectures as to heredity, one may see in the contradictions of Ruskin's character and breeding an evenly divided derivation from his parents. His father was a prosperous wine merchant, a liberal man with a genuine interest in books and art, a traveller with more than business interests, a man of the world. The mother