

CHAPTER VII

THE VALUE OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN FICTION

THE subject of this lecture is much more serious than may appear to you from this title. Young men of your age are not likely to believe in ghosts, nor inclined to consider the subject as worthy of attention. The first things necessary to understand are the philosophical and literary relations of the topic. Let me tell you that it would be a mistake to suppose that the stories of the supernatural have had their day in fine literature. On the contrary, wherever fine literature is being produced, either in poetry or in prose, you will find the supernatural element very much alive. Scientific knowledge has not at all diminished the pleasure of mankind in this field of imagination, though it may have considerably changed the methods of treatment. The success of writers of to-day like Maeterlinck is chiefly explained by their skill in the treatment of the ghostly, and of subjects related to supernatural fear. But without citing other living writers, let me observe that there is scarcely any really great author in European literature, old or new, who has not distinguished himself in the treatment of the supernatural. In English literature, I believe there is no exception—even from the time of the Anglo-Saxon poets to Shakespeare, and from Shakespeare to our own day. And this introduces us to the consideration of a general and remarkable fact, a fact that I do not remember to have seen in any books, but which is of very great philosophical importance:—There is something ghostly in all great art, whether of literature, music, sculpture, or architecture.

But now let me speak to you about this word “ghostly”; it is a much bigger word, perhaps, than some of you imagine. The old English had no other word for “spiritual” or “supernatural”—which two terms you know, are not English

but Latin. Everything that religion to-day calls divine, holy, miraculous, was sufficiently explained for the old Anglo-Saxons by the term ghostly. They spoke of a man's ghost, instead of speaking of his spirit or soul; and everything relating to religious knowledge they called ghostly. In the modern formula of the Catholic confession, which has remained almost unchanged for nearly two thousand years, you will find that the priest is always called a "ghostly" father—which means that his business is to take care of the ghosts or souls of men as a father does. In addressing the priest, the penitent really calls him "Father of my ghost." You will see, therefore, that a very large meaning really attaches to the adjective. It means everything relating to the supernatural. It means to the Christian even God himself, for the Giver of Life is always called in English the Holy Ghost.

Accepting the evolutionary philosophy which teaches that the modern idea of God as held by western nations is really but a development from the primitive belief in a shadow-soul, the term ghost in its reference to the Supreme Being certainly could not be found fault with. On the contrary, there is a weirdness about this use of the word which adds greatly to its solemnity. But whatever belief we have, or have not, as regards religious creeds, one thing that modern science has done for us, is to prove beyond all question that everything which we used to consider material and solid is essentially ghostly, as is any ghost. If we do not believe in old-fashioned stories and theories about ghosts, we are nevertheless obliged to recognize to-day that we are ghosts of ourselves—and utterly incomprehensible. The mystery of the universe is now weighing upon us, becoming heavier and heavier, more and more awful, as our knowledge expands, and it is especially a ghostly mystery. All great art reminds us in some way of this universal riddle; that is why I say that all great art has something ghostly in it. It touches something within us which relates to infinity. When you read a very great thought, when you see a

wonderful picture or statue or building, and when you hear certain kinds of music, you feel a thrill in the heart and mind much like the thrill which in all times men felt when they thought they saw a ghost or a god. Only the modern thrill is incomparably larger and longer and deeper. And this is why, in spite of all knowledge, the world still finds pleasure in the literature of the supernatural, and will continue to find pleasure in it for hundreds of years to come. The ghostly represents always some shadow of truth, and no amount of disbelief in what used to be called ghosts can ever diminish human interest in what relates to that truth.

So you will see that the subject is not altogether trifling. Certainly it is of very great moment in relation to great literature. The poet or the story-teller who cannot give the reader a little ghostly pleasure at times never can be either a really great writer or a great thinker. I have already said that I know of no exception to this rule in the whole of English literature. Take, for instance, Macaulay, the most practical, hard-headed, logical writer of the century, the last man in whom you would expect to find the least trace of superstition. Had you read only certain of his essays, you would scarcely think him capable of touching the chords of the supernatural. But he has done this in a masterly way in several of the "Lays of Ancient Rome" — for example, in speaking of the apparition of the Twin Brethren at the battle of Lake Regillus, and of Tarquin haunted by the phantom of his victim Lucretia. Both of these passages give the ghostly thrill in a strong way; and there is a fainter thrill of the same sort to be experienced from the reading of parts of "The Prophecy of Capys." It is because Macaulay had this power, though using it sparingly, that his work is so great. If he had not been able to write these lines of poetry which I referred to, he could not even have made his history of England the living history that it is. A man who has no ghostly feeling cannot make anything alive, not even a page of history or a page of oratory. To touch men's souls, you must know all that those

souls can be made to feel by words; and to know that, you must yourself have a "ghost" in you that can be touched in the same way.

Now leaving the theoretical for the practical part of the theme, let us turn to the subject of the relation between ghosts and dreams.

No good writer — no great writer — ever makes a study of the supernatural according to anything which has been done before by other writers. This is one of those subjects upon which you cannot get real help from books. It is not from books, nor from traditions, nor from legends, nor from anything of that kind that you can learn how to give your reader a ghostly thrill. I do not mean that it is of no use for you to read what has been written upon the subject, so far as mere methods of expression, mere effects of literary workmanship, are concerned. On the contrary, it is very important that you should read all you can of what is good in literature upon these subjects; you will learn from them a great deal about curious values of words, about compactness and power of sentences, about peculiarities of beliefs and of terrors relating to those beliefs. But you must never try to use another man's ideas or feelings, taken from a book, in order to make a supernatural effect. If you do, the work will never be sincere, and will never make a thrill. You must use your own ideas and feelings only, under all possible circumstances. And where are you to get these ideas and feelings from, if you do not believe in ghosts? From your dreams. Whether you believe in ghosts or not, all the artistic elements of ghostly literature exist in your dreams, and form a veritable treasury of literary material for the man that knows how to use them.

All the great effects obtained by poets and story writers, and even by religious teachers, in the treatment of supernatural fear or mystery, have been obtained, directly or indirectly, through dreams. Study any great ghost story in any literature, and you will find that no matter how surprising or unfamiliar the incidents seem, a little patient

examination will prove to you that every one of them has occurred, at different times, in different combinations, in dreams of your own. They give you a thrill. But why? Because they remind you of experiences, imaginative or emotional, which you had forgotten. There can be no exception to this rule — absolutely none. I was speaking to you the other day about a short story by Bulwer-Lytton, as being the best ghost story in the English language. The reason why it is the best story of this kind is simply because it represents with astonishing faithfulness the experiences of nightmare. The terror of all great stories of the supernatural is really the terror of nightmare, projected into waking consciousness. And the beauty or tenderness of other ghost stories or fairy-stories, or even of certain famous and delightful religious legends, is the tenderness and beauty of dreams of a happier kind, dreams inspired by love or hope or regret. But in all cases where the supernatural is well treated in literature, dream experience is the source of the treatment. I know that I am now speaking to an audience acquainted with literature of which I know practically nothing. But I believe that there can be no exception to these rules even in the literature of the Far East. I do not mean to say that there may not be in Chinese and in Japanese literature many ghost stories which are not derived from dream-experience. But I will say that if there are any of this kind, they are not worth reading, and cannot belong to any good class of literature. I have read translations of a number of Chinese ghost stories in French, also a wonderful English translation of ghostly Chinese stories in two volumes, entitled "Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio," by Herbert Giles. These stories, translated by a great scholar, are very wonderful; but I noticed that in every successful treatment of a supernatural subject, the incidents of the story invariably correspond with the phenomena of dreams. Therefore I think that I cannot be mistaken in my judgment of the matter. Such Japanese stories as I could get translations of, obeyed the same rule. The other

day, in a story which I read for the first time, I was very much interested to find an exact parallel between the treatment of a supernatural idea by the Japanese author, and by the best English author of dream studies. The story was about a picture, painted upon a screen, representing a river and a landscape. In the Japanese story (perhaps it has a Chinese origin) the painter makes a sign to the screen; and a little boat begins to sail down the river, and sails out of the picture into the room, and the room becomes full of water, and the painter, or magician, or whoever he is, gets into the boat and sails away into the picture again, and disappears for ever. This is exactly, in every detail, a dream story, and the excellence of it is in its truth to dream experience. The same phenomena you will find, under another form, in "Alice in Wonderland," and "Through the Looking Glass."

But to return to the point where we left off. I was saying that all successful treatment of the ghostly or the impossible must be made to correspond as much as possible with the truth of dream experience, and that Bulwer-Lytton's story of the haunted house illustrates the rule. Let us now consider especially the literary value of nightmare. Nightmare, the most awful form of dream, is also one of the most peculiar. It has probably furnished all the important elements of religious and supernatural terror which are to be found in really great literature. It is a mysterious thing in itself; and scientific psychology has not yet been able to explain many facts in regard to it. We can take the phenomena of nightmare separately, one by one, and show their curious relation to various kinds of superstitious fear and supernatural belief.

The first remarkable fact in nightmare is the beginning of it. It begins with a kind of suspicion, usually. You feel afraid without knowing why. Then you have the impression that something is acting upon you from a distance—something like fascination, yet not exactly fascination, for there may be no visible fascinator. But feeling uneasy, you wish to escape, to get away from the influence that is making

you afraid. Then you find it is not easy to escape. You move with great difficulty. Presently the difficulty increases—you cannot move at all. You want to cry out, and you can not; you have lost your voice. You are actually in a state of trance—seeing, hearing, feeling, but unable to move or speak. This is the beginning. It forms one of the most terrible emotions from which a man can suffer. If it continued more than a certain length of time, the mere fear might kill. Nightmare does sometimes kill, in cases where the health has been very much affected by other causes.

Of course we have nothing in ordinary waking life of such experience—the feeling of being deprived of will and held fast from a great distance by some viewless power. This is the real experience of magnetism, mesmerism; and it is the origin of certain horrible beliefs of the Middle Ages in regard to magical power. Suppose we call it supernatural mesmerism, for want of a better word. It is not true mesmerism, because in real hypnotic conditions, the patient does not feel or think or act mentally according to his own personality; he acts by the will of another. In nightmare the will is only suspended, and the personal consciousness remains; this is what makes the horror of it. So we shall call the first stage supernatural mesmerism, only with the above qualification. Now let us see how Bulwer-Lytton uses this experience in his story.

A man is sitting in a chair, with a lamp on the table beside him, and is reading Macaulay's essays, when he suddenly becomes uneasy. A shadow falls upon the page. He rises, and tries to call; but he cannot raise his voice above a whisper. He tries to move; and he cannot stir hand or foot. The spell is already upon him. This is the first part of nightmare.

The second stage of the phenomenon, which sometimes mingles with the first stage, is the experience of terrible and unnatural appearances. There is always a darkening of the visible, sometimes a disappearance or dimming of the light. In Bulwer-Lytton's story there is a fire burning in the room,

and a very bright lamp. Gradually both lamp and fire become dimmer and dimmer ; at last all light completely vanishes, and the room becomes absolutely dark, except for spectral and unnatural luminosities that begin to make their appearance. This also is a very good study of dream experience. The third stage of nightmare, the final struggle, is chiefly characterized by impossible occurrences, which bring to the dreamer the extreme form of horror, while convincing him of his own impotence. For example, you try to fire a pistol or to use a steel weapon. If a pistol, the bullet will not project itself more than a few inches from the muzzle ; then it drops down limply, and there is no report. If a sword or dagger, the blade becomes soft, like cotton or paper. Terrible appearances, monstrous or unnatural figures, reach out hands to touch ; if human figures, they will grow to the ceiling, and bend themselves fantastically as they approach. There is one more stage, which is not often reached — the climax of the horror. That is when you are caught or touched. The touch in nightmare is a very peculiar sensation, almost like an electric shock, but unnaturally prolonged. It is not pain, but something worse than pain, an experience never felt in waking hours.

The third and fourth stages have been artistically mixed together by Bulwer-Lytton. The phantom towers from floor to ceiling, vague and threatening ; the man attempts to use a weapon, and at the same time receives a touch or shock that renders him absolutely powerless. He describes the feeling as resembling the sensation of some ghostly electricity. The study is exactly true to dream-experience. I need not here mention this story further, since from this point a great many other elements enter into it which, though not altogether foreign to our subject, do not illustrate that subject so well as some of the stories of Poe. Poe has given us other peculiar details of nightmare-experience, such as horrible sounds. Often we hear in such dreams terrible muffled noises, as of steps coming. This you will find very well studied in the story called "The Fall of the House of

Usher.” Again in these dreams inanimate objects either become alive, or suggest to us, by their motion, the hiding of some horrible life behind them—curtains, for example, doors left half open, alcoves imperfectly closed. Poe has studied these in “Eleonora” and in some other sketches.

Dreams of the terrible have beyond question had a good deal to do with the inspiration both of religious and of superstitious literature. The returning of the dead, visions of heavenly or infernal beings,—these, when well described, are almost always exact reproductions of dream-experience. But occasionally we find an element of waking fear mixed with them—for example, in one of the oldest ghost stories of the world, the story in “The Book of Job.” The poet speaks of feeling intense cold, and feeling the hairs of his head stand up with fear. These experiences are absolutely true, and they belong to waking life. The sensation of cold and the sensation of horror are not sensations of dreams. They come from extraordinary terror felt in active existence, while we are awake. You will observe the very same signs of fear in a horse, a dog, or a cat—and there is reason to suppose that in these animal cases, also, supernatural fear is sometimes a cause. I have seen a dog—a brave dog, too—terribly frightened by seeing a mass of paper moved by a slight current of air. This slight wind did not reach the place where the dog was lying; he could not therefore associate the motion of the paper with a motion of the wind; he did not understand what was moving the paper; the mystery alarmed him, and the hair on his back stood up with fear. But the mingling of such sensations of waking fear with dream sensations of fear, in a story or poem, may be very effectually managed, so as to give to the story an air of reality, of actuality, which could not be obtained in any other way. A great many of our old fairy ballads and goblin stories mixed the two experiences together with the most excellent results. I should say that the fine German story of “Undine” is a good example of this kind. The sight of the faces in the water of the river, the changing

of waterfalls and cataracts into ghostly people, the rising from the closed well of the form of Undine herself, the rising of the flood behind her, and the way in which she “weeps her lover to death” — all this is pure dream; and it seems real because most of us have had some such experiences of fancy in our own dreams. But the other part of the story, dealing with human emotions, fears, passions—these are of waking life, and the mixture is accomplished in a most artistic way. Speaking of Undine obliges me also to speak of Undine’s predecessors in mediæval literature—the mediæval spirits, the *succubæ* and *incubi*, the sylphs and salamanders or salamandrines, the whole wonderful goblin population of water, air, forest, and fire. All the good stories about them are really dream studies. And coming down to the most romantic literature of our own day, the same thing must be said of those strange and delightful stories by Gautier, “La Morte Amoureuse,” “Arria Marcella,” “Le Pied de Momie.” The most remarkable is perhaps “La Morte Amoureuse”; but there is in this a study of double personality, which complicates it too much for purposes of present illustration. I shall therefore speak of “Arria Marcella” instead. Some young students visit the city of Pompeii, to study the ruins and the curiosities preserved in the museum of Naples, nearby. All of them are familiar with classic literature and classic history; moreover, they are artists, able to appreciate the beauty of what they see. At the time of the eruption, which occurred nearly two thousand years ago, many people perished by being smothered under the rain of ashes; but their bodies were encased in the deposit so that the form was perfectly preserved as in a mould. Some of these moulds are to be seen in the museum mentioned; and one is the mould of the body of a beautiful young woman. The younger of the three students sees this mould, and romantically wishes that he could see and love the real person, so many centuries dead. That night, while his companions are asleep, he leaves his room and wanders into the ruined city, for the pleasure of thinking all by himself. But presently,

as he turns the corner of a street, he finds that the city looks quite different from what it had appeared by day; the houses seem to have grown taller; they look new, bright, clean. While he is thus wandering, suddenly the sun rises, and the streets fill with people—not the people of to-day, but the people of two thousand years ago, all dressed in the old Greek and Roman costumes. After a time a young Greek comes up to the student and speaks to him in Latin. He has learned enough Latin at the university to be able to answer, and a conversation begins, of which the result is that he is invited to the theatre of Pompeii to see the gladiators and other amusements of the time. While in this theatre, he suddenly sees the woman that he wanted to see, the woman whose figure was preserved in the Naples museum. After the theatre, he is invited to her house; and everything is very delightful until suddenly the girl's father appears on the scene. The old man is a Christian, and he is very angry that the ghost of his daughter should deceive a young man in this manner. He makes a sign of the cross, and immediately poor Arria crumbles into dust, and the young man finds himself alone in the ruins of Pompeii. Very beautiful this story is; but every detail in it is dream study. I have given so much mention to it only because it seems to me the very finest French example of this artistic use of dream experience. But how many other romances belong to the same category? I need only mention among others Irving's "The Adelantado of the Seven Cities," which is pure dream, so realistically told that it gives the reader the sensation of being asleep. Although such romances as "The Seven Sleepers," "Rip Van Winkle," and "Urashima," are not, on the other hand, pure dreams, yet the charm of them is just in that part where dream experience is used. The true romance in all is in the old man's dream of being young, and waking up to cold and grave realities. By the way, in the old French lays of Marie de France, there is an almost precisely similar story to the Japanese one—similar, at least, at all points except the story of the tortoise. It is

utterly impossible that the oriental and the occidental story-tellers could have, either of them, borrowed from the other; more probably each story is a spontaneous growth. But it is curious to find the legend substantially the same in other literatures—Indian and Arabian and Javanese. In all of the versions the one romantic truth is ever the same—a dream truth.

Now besides the artistic elements of terror and of romance, dreams certainly furnish us with the most penetrating and beautiful qualities of ghostly tenderness that literature contains. For the dead people that we loved all come back to us occasionally in dreams, and look and talk as if they were actually alive, and become to us everything that we could have wished them to be. In a dream-meeting with the dead, you must have observed how everything is gentle and beautiful, and yet how real, how true it seems. From the most ancient times such visions of the dead have furnished literature with the most touching and the most exquisite passages to unselfish affection. We find this experience in nearly all the ancient ballad-literature of Europe; we find it in all the world's epics; we find it in every kind of superior poetry; and modern literature draws from it more and more as the years go by. Even in such strange compositions as the "Kalevala" of the Finns, an epic totally unlike any other ever written in this world, the one really beautiful passage in an emotional sense is the coming back of the dead mother to comfort the wicked son, which is a dream study, though not so represented in the poem.

Yet one thing more. Our dreams of heaven, what are they in literature but reflections in us of the more beautiful class of dreams? In the world of sleep all the dead people we loved meet us again; the father recovers his long-buried child, the husband his lost wife, separated lovers find the union that was impossible in this world, those whom we lost sight of in early years—dead sisters, brothers, friends—all come back to us just as they were then, just as loving, and as young, and perhaps even more beautiful than they could

really have been. In the world of sleep there is no growing old; there is immortality, there is everlasting youth. And again how soft, how happy everything is; even the persons unkind to us in waking life become affectionate to us in dreams. Well, what is heaven but this? Religion in painting perfect happiness for the good, only describes the best of our dream life, which is also the best of our waking life; and I think you will find that the closer religion has kept to dream experience in these descriptions, the happier has been the result. Perhaps you will say that I have forgotten how religion teaches the apparition of supernatural powers of a very peculiar kind. But I think that you will find the suggestion for these powers also in dream-life. Do we not pass through the air in dreams, pass through solid substances, perform all kinds of miracles, achieve all sorts of impossible things? I think we do. At all events, I am certain that when, as men of letters, you have to deal with any form of supernatural subject—whether terrible, or tender, or pathetic, or splendid—you will do well, if you have a good imagination, not to trust to books for your inspiration. Trust to your own dream-life; study it carefully, and draw your inspiration from that. For dreams are the primary source of almost everything that is beautiful in the literature which treats of what lies beyond mere daily experience.